

CHAPTER 4

A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW WE WILL BE JUDGED ON WHETHER WE DID THINGS IN OUR OWN STRENGTH OR IN HIS, THAT IS IN THE FLESH OR IN THE SPIRIT

It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

John 6:63 (RSV)

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Matthew 26:41 (RSV)

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

Romans 7:18 (RSV)

² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.⁹ But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.

Romans 8:2-10 (RSV)

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:16-24 (RSV)

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5 (RSV)

For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.

Philippians 3:3 (RSV)

⁷And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (RSV)

See Book Seven for a fuller explanation of our *old man* or *flesh*, i.e. our *sinful nature* that we inherited from Adam. It cannot do anything good. Everything it does is sin, because it always falls short of God's standards. Our flesh is completely selfish and self-centred. It cannot, and will not, ever serve God or obey Him. So, nothing that we ever do in or through our *flesh* can ever please God:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:5-8 (RSV)

We can only do good things which please God when our body, mind, emotions and will are operating in accordance with the wishes and instructions of our *new man* or *new nature*. That is our own *human spirit*, which comes back to life when we are born again.

Our new nature always wants to please God and to do His will. Conversely, everything that is done in accordance with the desires of our own flesh is sin and cannot be rewarded. However, that which we do while listening to and cooperating with our new man will be rewarded. That is because our new man has the same nature as Jesus and is therefore sinless.

Therefore our new man or new nature is the part of us which is able to hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit and to be guided by Him. It is through our new man that we "*walk by the Spirit*" and produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit :

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Galatians 5:13-17 (ESV)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
Galatians 5:22 (ESV)

However, if we choose instead to operate in the *flesh*, doing the kind of things that come naturally to our *old man*, or *sin nature*, then these are the very different things that we will produce:

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness,

orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV)

The things listed above are obviously fleshly. However, even things which, on the face of it, are good works can be mere *works of the flesh*, if done of our own accord, and for our own reasons. They could be done to indulge our pride, or to promote ourselves. God will not bless or reward things done for such carnal reasons. Jesus speaks in these terms when He refers to those who give or pray, but whose real motive for doing so is that they want to be seen and admired by others:

¹"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ²"Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:1-6 (RSV)

This is something which it took me a long time to understand. I can remember when I was a young Christian, in the early 1980s, being told by older believers "*It's no good you doing things in your own strength; you need to operate in God's strength*". I could never grasp what they were talking about. Partly that was because I was immature. However, it was also partly because nobody ever seemed to be able to give me any reasonably clear explanation, let alone a precise definition, of what it means to do things "*in your own strength*" or "*in the flesh*".

Perhaps they just did not know how to put it into plain words. So, I will attempt to do that now and to explain this difficult concept as clearly as I can. Hopefully you will not then need to spend years, as I did, not even knowing what it means, let alone how to avoid it.

God wants to do things *through us*, and for us to *cooperate with Him*, rather than have us acting independently of Him. He does give us talents and gifts. Sometimes those are at such a high level that we can impress others with our ability and drive and we can make spectacular things happen. However, such things can often be done solely through the use of our own natural ability or effort, without involving God or relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. If so, then God will not allow Himself to be glorified by what we do. Neither is He likely to give any reward for it. He will probably see it as presumption and as our acting independently of Him.

That was the view God took of the Israelites when they started a battle against the Amorites which He had not told them to get involved in. They had acted without involving or consulting Him. Therefore He did not assist them. In fact, He allowed them to be defeated. Moreover, God considered their wilfulness and presumption to be sin and it displeased Him:

⁴¹"Then you answered me, 'We have sinned against the LORD; we will go up and fight, just as the LORD our God commanded us.' And every man of you girded on his weapons of war, and thought it easy to go up into the hill country. ⁴² And the LORD said to me, 'Say to them, Do not go up or fight, for I am not in the midst of you; lest you be defeated before your enemies.'⁴³ So I spoke to you, and you would not hearken; but you rebelled against the command of the LORD, and were presumptuous and went up into the hill country. ⁴⁴ Then the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you and chased you as bees do and beat you down in Se'ir as far as Hormah. ⁴⁵

And you returned and wept before the LORD; but the LORD did not hearken to your voice or give ear to you.

Deuteronomy 1:41-45 (RSV)

I can remember when I was a young believer I would evangelise eagerly, which is a good thing. However, a lot of what I did was just me being naturally energetic, enthusiastic and persuasive. I was good with words and effective at arguing. Therefore I was able to persuade other students to come to church or to attend a debate or to do Bible studies with me.

Many of them agreed to become Christians, or at least they said they were doing so. But a lot of those people fell away later and did not persist. It was probably because they had never genuinely repented or believed in the first place. They had just been talked into it *by me personally*, not by the convicting voice of the Holy Spirit.

So, most of what I was producing were probably just ‘tares’ rather than wheat. That is a weed which looks like wheat, to begin with, but isn’t and it produces no harvest. So, what I mean is that many of them were not real converts, because they were drawn along *by me rather than by God*. Reaching them with the gospel had mostly been done through my own natural persuasiveness and energy, not by God’s leading.

That is not to say that there is anything wrong with effort, enthusiasm or persuasiveness. Those are all good things. The point is that God will not take pleasure in, or be glorified by, the things we do if they are *done solely through our own natural talent or energy*.

Another example of this is a married couple with whom I shared the gospel many years ago. I basically talked them both into believing and got them to agree to repent and to accept a set of doctrinal points. They both did so, but with obvious reluctance. They were also rather casual and even flippant about it all.

I could sense, even at the outset, that they were being persuaded by me, against their will, and that their hearts weren’t really in it. The reality was that they simply couldn’t match my arguments or defeat my logic. But that is no basis for any genuine conversion. One needs to be convicted to such an extent that one makes a genuine decision of one’s own will to repent and to change. Otherwise the person will not become a real disciple and will not continue. Sooner or later they will just fall away.

It later became apparent that their hearts had not changed in any meaningful way, or at least not adequately. They did not feel any deep conviction or grief about their own sin. It was all too casual. Neither of them lasted. They both fell away after a few years of intermittent church attendance and sporadic and unenthusiastic Bible reading. They were effectively my own converts rather than God’s. They were responding to me, not to Him. Their conversion, such as it was, had mostly been brought about by me, without the conviction that only the Holy Spirit can bring.

Such evangelistic achievements, or apparent achievements, as those above can only reflect glory upon us, not on God. That is not acceptable to Him and my own feeling is that He would not regard such service as valid, even if it was useful. At any rate, He would not reward it, which is our particular focus in this chapter. The same point applies equally to all service for God which is done in one’s own natural strength. It is by no means unique to evangelism. Consider what Jeremiah says below which is linked to what we are discussing here:

²³ Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”

Jeremiah 9:23-24 (ESV)

Jeremiah even goes so far as to say that a person who is operating in the power of their own flesh and trusting in their own strength, or even in the strength of other people rather than God, is actually under God's curse:

Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.

Jeremiah 17:5 (ESV)

If God was to accept and reward such fleshly, man-centred service then He would be sharing His glory with you, or even allowing you to glorify yourself. You ought not to want to do that, but even if you did want to, He will not cooperate with you anyway. What God is looking for is people who are *broken*:

***The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.***

Psalms 51:17 (RSV)

Brokenness is yet another word which few preachers speak about today, possibly because it is impossible to explain until it has happened to you. Becoming broken generally takes years, because it is a process rather than an event. Moreover, it tends to be a long and drawn out process. To be *broken* means that you have to *come to the end of yourself*. It means you have reached the end of your own personal resources or gifting and *no longer want to rely on them*. You have, at last, realised that in themselves your own natural strengths and abilities are:

- a) incapable of achieving God's purposes,
- b) incapable of pleasing Him,
- c) insufficient even to please you, let alone Him,
- d) only a basis for pride and self-glorification.

A broken person is rather like a young horse which has been worked on by its trainer over a period of time in order to break its will. He brings it to a condition where it is not only *willing* to obey its master's instructions, but it actually *desires* to do so. Such a horse still has a will, but of a different kind. It is now a will which has been *yielded to the will of its master*. Therefore that horse is now willing, indeed eager, to act entirely in accordance with the will of its owner.

A horse is at its best, and most fulfils the purposes for which it was created, when by the free exercise of its own will, it chooses to serve the purpose of its owner rather than to indulge itself or act independently of Him. Such a horse can then be trained how to run, jump, work and even to fight, under the instruction of its owner. Eventually it will instantly obey every command. It will even anticipate what those commands are likely to be, so as to be all the more ready to comply immediately.

A horse which operates on that basis is infinitely more useful than one which is still making its own decisions, in its own way, for its own purposes and on its own timescales. Moreover, that characteristic of yieldedness, far from diminishing the horse's dignity, actually enhances it. A horse which is broken has not lost any of its own honour. On the contrary, it has gained more than it had to begin with. It is in no way demeaned by the fact that it obeys the will of its master. It is more truly a horse, and more worthy of respect and praise, than it ever was before. That's because it is now acting in accordance with its true purpose, because it was created to serve its master, not to serve itself.

Likewise, a Christian can be broken by the long series of trials and difficulties that God deliberately arranges. If so, then he can reach a point where he is more free than he ever was when he used to

serve (and worship) himself. A Christian whose will has been broken in this way only wants to find out what God's will is. He now longs to do whatever God wants him to do. There is no longer any reluctance about doing so, because the lesson has at last been learned that God's will is always best. In fact it is the only thing worth doing.

Any person to whom God has given a lot of natural ability, or revelation, or who has a lot of knowledge, education or wealth, is particularly prone to relying on those things instead of relying on God. It is difficult not to do that because our very nature is so carnal. Therefore we tend to revert to type and do things in the flesh unless either we, or God, take steps to avoid it. The responsibility for avoiding that is mainly ours.

However, God's main way of tackling this is that He will deliberately bring problems, weaknesses, and even opponents, into your life to try to get you to rely on Him rather than on yourself. He will also make sure that your own natural ability or strength is *insufficient*, so that you have to turn to Him in your need, or even in desperation, to seek His help. That does not happen by chance. *God arranges it that way on purpose.*

We see an example of this in the life of apostle Paul. He had enormous natural advantages in terms of his background, ability and formal education, and even more so in the extent of the supernatural revelations that were given to him. He was shown far more than any other man, including the 12 apostles. Paul was actually taken to Heaven and allowed to see and hear things which nobody else has ever seen or heard.

So, if God had not done something about it, Paul would probably have become extremely conceited about his unique status and the enormity of his privileges. Indeed, it would have been hard for any human being not to have become proud if they had Paul's gifts. Therefore God gave Paul what he described as a "*thorn in the flesh*" in order to keep him humble and reliant on God:

⁷ And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (RSV)

Opinions differ as to precisely what Paul's "*thorn in the flesh*" was. My own personal view is that it was a very powerful and high-ranking demon which was given permission by God to attack and undermine Paul on an ongoing basis. That would explain the extraordinary amount of persecution and hostility that Paul faced, and yet always managed to survive. He describes some of this turmoil earlier in 2 Corinthians:

²⁴ Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.

2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (RSV)

The thorn in the flesh that was given to Paul was exceptionally severe. Most of us will never have to face even a fraction of the things Paul endured. Nevertheless, the likelihood is that some kind of thorn in the flesh will be given to every one of us, especially if we are prone to over-confidence or self-

reliance. If nothing else, God tends to arrange things so as to ensure that there is always *some ability or resource that you lack*. Or He will put *some obstacle in your path* that requires you to rely on Him and also on other people and which prevents you from achieving things all by yourself.

If you have ever wondered why God made you the way He did, ‘forgetting’ to give you some particular ability or character trait that you sorely wish you had, consider whether it could be deliberate. Perhaps you are shy and you wish you weren’t. Or maybe you are not a confident public speaker, or you went to the wrong school or university or to no university at all. Things such as that could just be ordinary obstacles which God simply wants you to overcome. But they could also be something which God put there, or left out, intentionally, so as to leave you with no option but to rely on Him if you are to succeed.

As I look back at more than 30 years of Christian life, during which God has been working on me like a horse trainer, I can see many of the things God was doing to break my stubborn, proud will. He was doing this even in the years before I was converted. He was trying to get me to set aside my own plans and ambitions and to yield to Him willingly and accept His plans by my own free choice. I will share just a few of the things He did to break me. If you look at your own life you will probably see God attempting similar things, though the precise details will obviously be different:

When I was 17 I was offered a place at Cambridge University to study law and economics and I fully expected to get in. I felt sure that that was where my future lay. I had been made a conditional offer which, amongst other things, required me to get an A in economics. It was in the days before the A* grade existed. I felt sure I would get it, since it was by far my best subject. However, the next summer when I was 18, I found I’d only got a B for economics, not an A. I couldn’t believe it. I wondered if there had been a mix up at the examining board.

The school therefore appealed and had the exam papers remarked. It then emerged that I’d done well in paper one, getting well over the grade A mark. However, on paper two they said something very odd had happened. I had scored zero out of 25 for one of the four long essay questions. The school was told that the other three essays were fine, but that for one of them, I had entirely missed the point of the question. Therefore nothing that I wrote earned even a single mark. It was all totally irrelevant.

I had somehow been diverted off the point of the question and I now feel sure that God had arranged it deliberately. Nothing of the sort has ever happened before or since. I believe God scrambled my mind for one quarter of that exam and caused me to write an answer to some other imaginary question, without even realising that I wasn’t addressing the actual question. It was rather like what He did with King Nebuchadnezzar. God took his mind away and gave him the mind of a beast for seven years.

Thankfully, I only experienced that demotion for about 45 minutes, but it was long enough to keep me out of Cambridge. Even though I got all the other grades they’d asked for, they refused to compromise on their overall offer, so I was rejected. It was the most painful experience I had ever had up to that point and it left me reeling. In fact, it felt like a sudden bereavement.

Yet, that painful loss, which I considered to be a tragedy at the time, created an emotional wound or opening, as when skin is broken by a cut. During the following year it allowed the message of the gospel to get past the thick, leathery skin of my heart. I therefore became a Christian 10 months later, in my first year at university.

However, that was just the start of the breaking process. God had merely created some cracks in the ‘tarmac’, so that His Word could get in. It took another 25-30 years before the breaking process came anywhere near to what one could call complete. In fact, there is probably never a time when it is absolutely complete. Let me briefly describe three other traumatic experiences along the way which God also used to break me. However, there were many more. These are just some examples.

This second trauma was something to which I referred in Book Two. It happened in a business in which I used to be an equity partner. I was a one third owner in a law firm but one of the partners was dishonest. Moreover, the other one didn't care and wasn't willing to do anything about it. I caught the first one forging a false invoice on the firm's letterhead. He had sent it to a large commercial client of the firm and intended for that client to pay *him personally*, rather than send his cheque to the firm, as it should have been.

When I reported this to the Senior Partner he promised to help me to tackle the wrongdoer, but he later broke his word and did nothing. So I told them I was leaving the firm and that I intended to take my staff and files with me. Initially they refused to allow me to leave, so I began a legal action to wind up the practice on the basis of the second partner's misconduct and the Senior Partner's refusal to help me tackle him. Then the two of them, who had known each other for years and were very close, voted to expel me from the firm. They did so because I was rocking the boat by challenging the wrongdoer.

So, instead of the wrongdoer being brought to justice, it was I who ended up having to leave, and with nothing. They kept for themselves all of my capital which I had built up in that firm. It seemed a lot of money to me, and I never got it back. They refused to repay me any of it and invented a number of bogus reasons to justify the non-payment.

That meant that the only way I could get my capital back would be to sue them. But then I would have had to spend about two years, and a fortune in legal fees, trying to recover it. They were therefore very brazen and calculating about holding on to my assets and money. They judged, correctly, that I would not be able to afford to fight a case against them at the same time as starting a new business.

I then had to make an agonising choice. I could use the small amount of money I had got left to start a new firm of my own, or else I could use it to sue them and to force them to give me my capital back. It was clear that I couldn't do both. So, I chose to walk away. I then started a new law firm with no staff, no files, no clients, no equipment, no telephones, no furniture, no anything.

All I had on day one was a dining room chair from home in an empty office, with my mobile phone as the firm's only telephone. Even to call it a "*firm*" would be a misnomer, because it was just me on my own. It was all entirely pathetic and unimpressive in the eyes of the world. But I later came to see that it was God's chosen way for me to set up a law firm. Moreover, it was God's way of reducing my pride, wilfulness and excessive self-confidence.

From that extremely lowly starting point, the business grew and grew, until it was unrecognisable. But, in those early months and years it was a harrowing ordeal. The sense of injustice I felt at what had been stolen from me, plus all of the stress and pressure of setting up a new firm from a standing start were pulverising. I had always been a very confident person and I had strongly believed in my own abilities. However, the whole experience knocked a large percentage of the pride and self-sufficiency out of me, until I felt like a punch-drunk boxer. Yet God was in all of it, and He used every bit of it for His purposes.

Shortly afterwards, while I was still reeling from the first crisis, God allowed yet another series of problems to hit me. This time it was in the church rather than at work. A church leader that I had known very closely for many years started to lie to me and about me. He did so because I had begun to challenge him about his conduct, especially his level of personal honesty, because he was getting a reputation for being a liar. He caused both me and my wife a lot of harm within that church, and also in a series of other churches which we later went to.

We therefore left his church and spent a long time trying to find a decent, honest, godly set of church leaders somewhere else, but we simply couldn't find any. Instead we encountered insincerity, greed,

manipulation, haughtiness, personal ambition and the desire for control. And we found those things *in one church after another*. Eventually I came to realise that these features are the norm rather than the exception, at least within Great Britain.

God had opened my eyes and given me a measure of discernment. Therefore I began to be able to see those character flaws in a great many church leaders, whereas I'd been entirely blind to it before. However, the problem from then on was that I could quickly see the same pride, falseness, ambition and haughtiness all over the place, in church after church. So there was no church that we could find that was not apostate, at least in part.

During those years, as we searched in vain for a suitable church, God taught me a series of lessons about the reality of the dire condition of the churches in the West. That was partly because He wanted me to be able to write about it. However, he also wanted to use that series of difficult experiences to continue the breaking process in me.

On top of all that, after I had set up my new law firm, I unwisely recruited a lot of new staff, far too quickly. God stepped back and let me have my own way. He allowed me to make many disastrously unsuitable appointments. That said, I have to admit that I did not actually seek His guidance. I just assumed that He wanted me to grow the business as rapidly as possible, which He didn't. Therefore, for over ten years I always had one or more people working for me who were causing me a headache through their dishonesty, laziness, malice or incompetence.

At its peak I had over 80 staff, so it wasn't difficult for some very bad ones to get past my recruitment processes. God used a long series of very bad staff to teach me about the grim reality of human wickedness. That was a subject which I had had no desire to study, but which I was then forced to focus on and specialise in for over a decade.

One of God's purposes was to enable me to learn how to recognise and handle wickedness and wicked people so that I could write about it and them. However, His other aim was to use a long succession of wicked people to help Him to continue to break me by 13 years of stress, difficulty and opposition. God still isn't finished with the will-breaking project, even now. I expect that it will carry on until I die. However, the lessons I've learned so far about operating in one's own strength and abilities have changed me to such an extent that I:

- a) no longer want to be independent of God or achieve things by myself
- b) no longer have anywhere near as high an opinion of myself
- c) genuinely just want to do whatever God wants and nothing else
- d) no longer want to pursue my own ideas
- e) only want to do things God's way, not my own way
- f) only want the good staff that God sends me, not the bad ones that I seem to find for myself
- g) only want the volume of business that God wants; I no longer want to build an empire
- h) no longer seek for the praise of men, just God's praise
- i) am thankful for all the bad experiences and traumas I have faced and can see their value.

We see a similar breaking process in operation, albeit on a much larger scale, in the life of Jacob's son, Joseph. God allowed him to go through a series of appalling experiences. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers and then falsely accused by his master's wife, so that he spent years in

prison as an innocent man. That long, slow process of affliction broke Joseph and eventually made him into the kind of man who could become Prime Minister of Egypt and also save his whole family from the famine which was coming.

However the breaking process in Joseph's life wasn't over until it was over. Let's join the Genesis account of his long and drawn out sufferings while Joseph is still in prison, two years before God arranges for him to be released. At this point he had already been in prison for years. Yet he had become an extremely skilled and effective administrator. Indeed, the keeper of the prison had seen Joseph's exceptional qualities and had put him in charge of all the other prisoners. Also, he had grown in wisdom and was able to interpret dreams and operate prophetically.

Yet, even after all that, he was still not quite ready to be released from the prison. God could see that there was still too much self and flesh in Joseph. In this next passage listen to Joseph speaking to Pharaoh's chief butler. That man had just had his dream interpreted by Joseph, who told him that he was about to be released from prison. Joseph then pleads with the butler to remember him when he gets out and to help him to get released too. Count how many times the pronouns "I" and "me" occur in what Joseph says:

¹⁴ But remember me, when it is well with you, and do me the kindness, I pray you, to make mention of 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 dungeon."

Genesis 40:14-15 (RSV)

Although it is fully understandable that Joseph should feel aggrieved and eager to get out of prison, the fact remains that there is still some self-centeredness and fleshliness left in him. The breaking process was not yet complete. So, God left him in prison for two more years of suffering and injustice, during which God continued to break Joseph. It eventually came to an end when Pharaoh himself had a dream, about cows and ears of corn. The butler then remembered Joseph and advised Pharaoh to seek an interpretation from him.

Pharaoh then met Joseph and praised him for the way he had interpreted the butler's dream. However, note the very different way in which Joseph now speaks when he replies to Pharaoh. He is no longer absorbed with himself, but modestly redirects Pharaoh's praise to God. He makes it clear that it was God who gave the previous interpretation to him about the butler and that only God can now interpret Pharaoh's dream:

¹⁴Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it; and I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Genesis 41:14-16 (RSV)

So, in Joseph's case, God could very clearly see that even though it had gone on for some years, the breaking process still wasn't quite finished. Joseph needed another two years in the furnace of affliction to knock some more of the wilfulness and self-centeredness out of him. God also wanted to deal with the boastful insensitivity and tactlessness which had so upset his brothers in the first place. The humble way that Joseph replied to Pharaoh shows that the objective had been achieved.

So, moving back to our original question about what it means to operate in our own strength, let's explore this and also examine some verses which touch upon it. Firstly, unless God is already doing something and is clearly involved in a project, don't even think about joining in with it, or doing anything at all to assist with it. You must never try to build anything *by yourself* or *for yourself*. If you do then it is a work of the flesh.

But you must not support any other man either, if he is making that same mistake. Only support ministries which God supports, not those which are a work of other men's flesh. Their flesh is no better than yours and so they too would be working in vain:

*¹Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
²It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.*

Psalm 127:1-2 (ESV)

Pray to be given God's strength, rather than relying on your own strength or trying to produce more of it from within yourself. Also pray that God will guide you to become involved *only in what He is doing* and *not to initiate anything by or for yourself*. Then put all your trust in Him, not in yourself. Furthermore, don't ever aim to be anybody important or famous, at least not in this life.

Also, start to pray for the desire for *Him* to be glorified rather than you and for *His* purposes to be achieved, not yours. Ideally, that should be your sincere wish. But if it isn't, then still pray for it anyway, and ask God to make it your sincere wish. Pray also for you to be able to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than in your own strength:

Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

Zechariah 4:6 (ESV)

*The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.*

Psalm 118:14 (ESV)

*Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually!*

1 Chronicles 16:11 (ESV)

*The LORD is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;
my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.*

Psalm 28:7 (ESV)

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*

Psalm 84:5 (ESV)

*The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.*

Psalm 33:16 (ESV)

*⁶The righteous shall see and fear,
and shall laugh at him, saying,
⁷"See the man who would not make God his refuge,
but trusted in the abundance of his riches
and sought refuge in his own destruction!"*

Psalm 52:6-7 (KJV)

Until we realise that doing things in our own strength and on our own initiative is useless and futile, we will get nowhere. God will just keep us on an ongoing *breaking in program* until we eventually grasp the point. He wants us to start to listen to Him, let go of our own ambitions, follow orders and stop trusting in our own abilities. We must start to realise that we can do nothing in or through our own flesh, and that only things done in God's strength, and on His initiative, are going to be considered valid.

When we grasp these things we can then begin to learn how to do things *with God, alongside Him*, rather than *by ourselves*. He cannot involve us in any of His projects until we have thoroughly understood these things and begun to listen to His voice and obey it, rather than do our own thing in our own way and on our own initiative.

God does want us to have a proper, healthy sense of confidence, but He does not want that to go too far, such that it becomes self-confidence or self-sufficiency. *He wants our confidence to be in Him, not in ourselves*. He actually also wants us to be fully aware of, and even glad about, our own weakness. Such awareness of our own shortcomings makes us feel more *dependent on Him*, which is exactly what He wants us to feel. In fact, He wants us to boast only of our need for Him:

⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (ESV)

God takes no pleasure from our strengths or abilities in themselves. As we have seen, it was He who gave us whatever natural strength or ability that we have anyway. He put it all there in the first place. Therefore God is not impressed by us merely using our natural abilities. Why should He be? What gives Him pleasure is seeing those people who, like a well broken horse, put all their focus and trust in Him and who love, respect and fear Him and then *do what He guides them to do, in reliance upon Him*:

***¹⁰His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,
¹¹but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.***

Psalms 147:10-11 (ESV)

How to tell whether you are operating in the flesh or in the Spirit.

One of the hardest things in the Christian life is to recognise when you are actually operating in the flesh, i.e. to catch yourself doing it. Even if you can understand the concept, which is a hard one to grasp, it's even harder to see it in yourself and realise when you are doing it. It is something which we tend to drift into by long established habit, without being aware we are doing it. However, there are some tell-tale signs that you can watch out for. They will help you to see this fault in yourself or at least to see it earlier. Here are some examples:

When you are operating in the flesh then a project, ministry or task will be likely to be a *strain* and to *create stress and exhaustion in you*. You may find that you are *regularly pressing and shoving and becoming irritable* about it rather than gliding along easily with a smooth, steady rhythm. This is often called *striving*.

By contrast, if you are operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, through your new man rather than your flesh, things will generally feel more relaxed and peaceful. You might still get tired from your

work. But it will be in a healthy way, not the strained, exhausted, frazzled kind of tiredness that striving produces. God therefore wants us to work hard, but not to strive:

***Cease striving and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.***

Psalm 46:10 (NASB)

If you are operating in the flesh you are likely to end up feeling *insecure, suspicious and even paranoid* about other people. Instead of being relaxed about seeing others around you succeeding and getting promoted, you are likely to feel *threatened* by them and *unhealthily competitive*. Your new man is not envious of anybody else or insecure about himself, but your old man certainly is.

If you are operating in the flesh you are likely also to feel *anxious, worried, troubled and fearful*, and on a regular basis. Conversely, if in your heart you feel you are simply joining in with one of God's projects and helping Him, then such negative emotions will not arise.

For example a soldier with the rank of private does not feel any anxiety about whether the war is being conducted well, or whether the invasion of France is being properly planned. He just does his part and leaves it to generals and politicians to worry about such things. But if that soldier was anxious it may be a sign that he is wrongly taking upon himself responsibilities and concerns that are not rightfully his.

A person who is operating in the flesh tends to *grab or seize opportunities rather than waiting* and allowing God to give those opportunities to them. They will try to force doors to open and *make things happen*, rather than letting God open doors if, and when, He wishes to. I have done this many times, as it is an easy mistake to make.

Whenever God is involved in something then it will almost always *start small and progress slowly to begin with*. Thus if you are planning a project and you are thinking of doing anything large at the start, or making rapid progress or expansion in the early stages, then the likelihood is that what you are doing is your own plan not God's. Moreover, it is probably being conducted according to your timetable, not His. *Starting large and growing quickly are tell-tale signs that you are operating in the flesh.*

I have made that very mistake myself in business where I have been impatient to get things moving and to get more staff recruited and more teams in place, even before the staff I already had were properly trained. Over the years God has helped me to learn how foolish such impatience is, and to recognise it as fleshly. It is a departure from His will, because God is never impatient. He always does things properly rather than urgently.

So far I have been focusing on people who have a lot of self-confidence and an excessive and unhealthy belief in their own abilities. Such a person is obviously operating in the flesh. However, the same can be equally true of a person who lacks confidence and is reluctant to do things for God because he *fears being considered a failure or being criticised* by other people.

Such concerns are just as much a product of the flesh nature as boastful, gung-ho, self-confidence is. If you fear criticism or failure and therefore are not willing to take any risks in attempting things for God then ask yourself:

"Why am I more concerned about how I appear to others, or what they say about me, than I am about being obedient to God and useful in His service?"

The same carnal focus upon self that causes a confident person to seek to promote and project himself can just as easily cause a timid, diffident person to hold back and avoid obeying God for fear of being

reduced in the opinions of others. Either way, it is the same flesh nature which keeps each person *focused on himself, and on what people think of him*, rather than on God. Their flesh nature is simply being manifested in a different way.

Returning to the theme of grabbing for things, sometimes it can appear, when some opportunity or position has become available, that it must be a God-given opening. It can look and feel good. Indeed, it can seem to be the very thing you have been waiting for and praying for. And then it becomes available, except for the fact that there is some blockage, or a delay, or some person who is standing in the way. The test you then face is how you deal with that.

A carnal Christian will not find it difficult to persuade themselves that this apparent opportunity that has arisen is obviously an answer to prayer. They feel sure and that they should grab it now, while it is still available, and before someone else gets it. That Christian can easily forget, or ignore, the fact that *any genuine opening or position that God gives to us will not need to be grabbed*. It will be put into our hands by God, without the need for any aggressive or hasty action on our part.

If you allow yourself to be ruled by your flesh, such that you respond impatiently, then you may well get that job or opportunity, but *you will have got it for yourself and by yourself*. It will no longer be a gift from God. Neither will it necessarily have His blessing on it. You will have seized it for yourself, by your own effort. Therefore *you will have to operate in it, and hold on to it, by yourself*, in your own strength. Moreover, you will, quite possibly, have to do all that without God's help.

You will then find that you have got yourself a job, promotion or business, or perhaps a leadership position in a church. However, God may not give it His full blessing, or even any blessing at all, because you didn't get it *from Him*. You got it *for yourself*. God will not allow you to manipulate Him or 'bounce' Him into a position where He *has* to support you. Nobody can make God feel obligated to do anything.

Some people act in that manipulative way with others. They get involved in something, or buy something, and then the people around them feel obliged to help, because otherwise it could end up in disaster. But God won't allow you to box Him in like that. He won't let you use Him as your tool or resource. Therefore, if you get yourself into a situation, job or ministry by grabbing it, then you may find that God will leave you to flounder. He might leave you to get yourself out of that mess by yourself, without His help.

It is not that He is unmerciful. It would actually be for your benefit, in the longer term, that He should allow you to face the consequences of your own carnal decisions or actions. Then you can learn not to do it again. If He was to bail you out every time, you would never learn and would continue acting in this manner and grabbing things for yourself.

We must avoid grabbing, even when an opportunity really is from God. A genuine God-given gift can be spoiled by the manner in which you receive it. But if an opportunity is received and entered into in the right way, at the right time, with the right attitude and without pushing other people out of the way, then God can really bless it and give it increase.

The demons who are involved in your life are well aware of all this. Therefore they will try to tempt you to seize things which God did not intend you to have or to do. They will also try to get you to receive things in the wrong way, or prematurely, or at the wrong speed, even if it is something that God does want you to have or to do.

Demons are realistic. They know how far you can be deceived and also the types of tricks that you won't fall for. They know that if they tried to tempt you to rob a bank you wouldn't do it. You would see through it and refuse to cooperate. But if you can be got to think that God is offering you an opportunity, then it is not very difficult for them to get you to spoil that by the manner or timing of your acceptance of it.

The demons know that they may not be able to prevent you from receiving that job or position, but they can at least tarnish it. They can turn it, even at the last minute, from a God-given opportunity into a work of the flesh, simply by putting the idea into your head of grabbing it for yourself. If they can achieve that it will have long lasting consequences and can partly, or even completely, spoil what God intended to give to you.

A classic example of how to receive something patiently, and without any involvement of the flesh, is the way Boaz dealt with Ruth. He wanted to marry her after her first husband died. However, there was another man who had a prior right to marry Ruth. He was a closer relative to Ruth's first husband than Boaz was. If that man had chosen to marry Ruth then Boaz would have been bitterly disappointed because he could see that she was a woman of worth.

Nevertheless, Boaz kept calm and did not do anything to push the other man out of the way or to assert his own claim. He waited to see what the other man did, because he knew that that other man's claim was legally stronger than his own. Boaz trusted in God to arrange matters and did not try to fix it all for himself:

¹² And now it is true that I am a near kinsman, yet there is a kinsman nearer than I. ¹³ Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him do it; but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you. Lie down until the morning."

Ruth 3:12-13 (RSV)

It transpired that the other man chose not to marry Ruth, because he did not want to harm his own children's future inheritance. So the way then became clear for Boaz to become Ruth's husband. They later had a son who became the grandfather of King David and, ultimately, the ancestor of Jesus Himself. It was all in God's plan, but the point is that *Boaz allowed God to work it out* rather than trying to make things happen by himself, using pressure or manipulation.

Turning now to what was said above at point (e), consider a couple of examples from the Bible which illustrate the principle that any genuine move of God usually begins small and progresses slowly for a time. Take firstly the Promise made to Abram, who was later renamed Abraham. God told him that he would be a "*father of multitudes*". When that was said to him he had no son at all. He then had to wait for 24 long and agonising years before his wife, Sarah, eventually became pregnant.

So by that stage, 24 years later, when he was 100 years old, Abraham had just one promised son, i.e. Isaac, and even he was a newborn baby. That does not sound much like a multitude. Moreover, it took a very long time after that before Isaac had any children. He was aged 40 when he married Rebecca and she was unable to have children for another 20 years. Therefore, it was not until Isaac was aged 60, and Abraham was 160, that Esau and Jacob were born.

But even then, only Jacob was part of the promise. Esau was not. So, even after 85 years of waiting, there were *still only two descendants of the promise that had been born to Abraham*, i.e. Isaac and Jacob. If that was a start-up business most of us would view it as a dismal failure. Those three men did not look the least bit like a 'nation'. Yet, that is how God does things, and that kind of timetable is not unusual for Him.

In the third and fourth generations it did begin to speed up a little. Jacob had 12 sons and they each had wives and children. However, even when they went into Egypt, about 215 years after the promise was first made to Abraham, the entire extended family still only numbered 70 people. Many other families have achieved far greater increases than that in just 50 years. Nevertheless, that was how slowly and carefully God moved.

However, over 400 years after that, when the descendants of Jacob left Egypt, they numbered roughly two million and they then grew more numerous from then on. It is a hallmark of God's projects that *the rapid stages of expansion come in the later stages, not at the start*. Conversely, a work of the flesh will often start big, grow rapidly and then collapse or fizzle out.

As a second example, take what Jesus did. He spent three and a half years pouring most of His time and energy into training just 12 men. Moreover, He did not even start doing that until He had first worked as a builder/carpenter until He was about 30. Jesus deliberately chose not to start big but to start small. He is our model in this regard and I regret to say that when I began my business I did not follow His example.

I was in such a rush to grow that I took on too much work from too many clients. I then foolishly appointed a lot of unsuitable staff to do that work, whom God had never wanted me to recruit. Therefore, realistically, I do not expect to receive much, if any, reward for the way I managed my business in those early years. If I had my time again I would do it very differently.