

## **CHAPTER 1**

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

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

*Luke 14:25-28 (NKJV)*

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

*Luke 14:33 (ESV)*

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

*Luke 17:33 (NKJV)*

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

*Deuteronomy 8:5 (RSV)*

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

*1 Samuel 2:30(b) (RSV)*

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

*John 8:31 (NASB)*

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

*1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (ESV)*

*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

*John 13:35 (RSV)*

*Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

*Luke 9:62 (ESV)*

*<sup>40</sup> So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.*

*Acts 5:40-41 (RSV)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That, in turn, is because a lot of church leaders take the view (correctly) that if they told the truth about what the Bible actually tells us to expect, then many of us would leave their churches. They know that many of us would go elsewhere, so as to hear a more comfortable message. A large percentage of church leaders are hirelings, doing a paid job, rather than genuine shepherds.

They choose to limit themselves to saying what people *want* to hear rather than what they *need* to hear. (See Book Eight for more details of the differences between hirelings and shepherds) I will now attempt to summarize what the Bible actually tells a disciple to expect. However, for the reasons stated above, you may find that it is a message that you have not heard before.

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

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

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

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

Instead, most of us just want an easy life and to avoid inconvenience, hard work and discomfort. But, in taking the easy options, we are not experiencing the things that God wants us to face and overcome. Therefore we miss out on a great many blessings. In particular we would miss out on some or all of the rewards that Jesus will one day give out at the Judgment Seat of Christ to those who have served Him faithfully. (See Book 4.)

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

However, it also involves handing over your whole life to Him and agreeing to follow and obey Him, whatever the cost may be. It means a complete surrender of your own will to His, and to do what He wants, even if that clashes with what you want, as it often will. It may mean facing suffering, or even death, for His sake.

A real Christian must be willing to receive the whole package of what it means to be a disciple, both the good and the bad. Those are strange and extreme sounding statements to make. They will jar with most modern ears and sound excessive. We live in an age which has largely forgotten what discipleship is and we don't like to talk about duty, self-sacrifice or hardship.

We know what it is to be a fan, but Jesus is not looking for fans. He is not a celebrity or a pop star. He is the King. In fact, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is also the Creator, Saviour, High Priest and Judge. Given all of that, He is fully entitled to expect complete loyalty and devoted service.

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

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

In much of the underdeveloped world, and especially in Islamic countries, becoming a Christian today may well involve losing one's life. More Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined. And it is getting even worse in this century, though our dishonest and politically correct media chooses not to report any of that. Their silence is primarily due to fear of being seen to criticise Islam. It is persistently portrayed as if it was a '*religion of peace*'.

In fact, it has always been spread and sustained by violence and intimidation, and it still is. For that reason, it is now by far the main persecutor of the Church. Moreover, the power and viciousness of Islam is growing and it is spreading into Europe and America, in which it previously had no foothold. Soon, even in the West, becoming a Christian will involve increasingly severe persecution at the hands of Muslims and also aggressive secularists.

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

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

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

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

*1 Peter 4:12-16 (RSV)*

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

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

*Acts 9:15-16 (RSV)*

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

*<sup>24</sup> Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup> 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; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.*

*2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (RSV)*

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

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

*Philippians 1:27-30 (ESV)*

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

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

*2 Timothy 3:10-13 (RSV)*

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

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

*Philippians 2:12-18 (ESV)*

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

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

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

*Timothy 6:12 (a) (RSV)*

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

*Ephesians 6:10-12 (RSV)*

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

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

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

The war between God and His enemies has been going on ever since the Devil rebelled and led astray one third of the angels in Heaven. The scale of that battle grew even larger after Adam fell into sin. From then on human beings also became God's enemies, alongside the demons. Every Christian is part of that war and is expected to fight in it. Regrettably, that fact is not widely known.

Some of us may have heard of it, but we don't really believe it, or we won't accept it. Even if we do know there is a war, many of us see ourselves as non-combatants, or even neutrals. Those who think that way have no intention of fighting in any war or of getting caught up in it. However, whether you know it or not, you are already caught up in that war anyway. That is, provided you are a *real* Christian.

If you are, then Satan and his demons will regard you as a target, irrespective of what you may think of them. It is not a war against human beings, and it does not involve guns, bombs or any other such weapons. Neither can it involve the use of carnal methods and techniques which the world uses, such as deception, manipulation, domination or the control of other people. It is, nonetheless, a very real conflict, which is fought on many different fronts and in every part of your life.

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

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

*Ephesians 6:13-17 ((RSV)*

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

*Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan; <sup>2</sup> it was only that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, that he might teach war to such at least as had not known it before. <sup>3</sup> These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Ba'al-her'mon as far as the entrance of Hamath. <sup>4</sup>*

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

***Judges 3:1-4 (RSV)***

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

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

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

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

***Joshua 5:13-15 (RSV)***

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

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

***Joshua 6:1-5 (RSV)***

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

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

***Joshua 8:1-3 (RSV)***

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

*Joshua 8:18-19 (RSV)*

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

<sup>9</sup> *And David became greater and greater, for the Lord of hosts was with him.*

*1 Chronicles 11:9 (RSV)*

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

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

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

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

*“..... You shall love your neighbour as yourself”*

*Matthew 19:19(b) (RSV)*

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

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

*Luke 9:23 (RSV)*

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

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



*in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 3:7-14 (RSV)*

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

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

*Galatians 5:22-23 (RSV)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*1 Peter 1:17 (NIV)*

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

*1 Peter 2:11 (RSV)*

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

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

*1 John 2:15-17 (RSV)*

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

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

*1 John 4:1-6 (RSV)*

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

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

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

*<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. <sup>9</sup> You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised*

*Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.*

*Romans 8:5-11 (ESV)*

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

*Colossians 3:5-14 (ESV)*

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

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

Whereas our battle against our own flesh takes place within ourselves, our battle against the world and all it stands for is an external one. By 'the world' we mean all of the thinking, values, standards, ways, priorities, practices, obsessions and methods of the unsaved and sinful world around us.

It is a shorthand phrase for the whole way that this present evil age operates. This second part of our battle then is to resist the many temptations that this sinful world has to offer and to refuse to be conformed to it, or squeezed into its mould:

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

*Colossians 3:1-2 (RSV)*

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

*Romans 12:2 (ESV)*

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

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

*Ephesians 4:17-19 (RSV)*

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

*Ephesians 4:22-24 (RSV)*

<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

*Ephesians 5:3-12 (ESV)*

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

*Ephesians 5:15-20 (ESV)*

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

*Philippians 4:8 (ESV)*

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

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

*1 John 3:13 (RSV)*

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

*John 15:18-19 (ESV)*

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

*1 Peter 4:3-5 (RSV)*

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

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

*James 4:4 (RSV)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

We must also take active steps to rid ourselves of any sense of shame or embarrassment at being openly identified as being a disciple of Jesus. Many Christians feel reasonably relaxed about speaking about ‘church’ or even ‘God’. However, there is something about the specific name of ‘Jesus’ and also about speaking of the cross or the Gospel, that makes even real Christians feel awkward and embarrassed.

So they avoid the use of the Name ‘Jesus’ and also avoid or tone down any reference to the Gospel. We need to resolve to overcome that sense of shame, as apostle Paul did, and be open about the whole Gospel:

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

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

He impressed me further when he then asked: “*How can I get rid of that fear of people?*” My reply was that the best way would be to replace his fear of people with an even stronger fear of God. That

is that we need to develop such a strong fear of the LORD that it negates, or drives out, any fear of people that we might still suffer from.

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

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

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

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

However, the same is true in reverse as well. That is they do not fear God, because they do not fear His Word. We are meant to fear God’s Word. It is meant to be awesome to us, because of *whose* Word it is and also because of its power. However, there is another reason why we should fear God’s Word, which few of us ever realise.

That is that when we are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ, one of the criteria by which we will be judged is the extent to which we have taken note of, and obeyed, God’s written Word. (See Book Four for a fuller discussion of this theme). The point is that whenever we read God’s Word, and even more so whenever we teach or preach from it, we will be held accountable, and one day judged, for how we handled it.

Jesus will hold us accountable for whether we believed it and also whether we took it seriously or treated it lightly. If we are in any position of leadership, such that we teach or preach, then Jesus will judge whether we compromised and edited His Word, so as to avoid making ourselves unpopular or arousing antagonism, or whether we presented it fully and accurately.

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

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

***All these things my hand has made,  
and so all these things are mine,  
says the LORD.***

*But this is the man to whom I will look,  
he that is humble and contrite in spirit,  
and trembles at my word.*

*Isaiah 66:2 (RSV)*

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

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

Until they are cast into the Lake of Fire, most of the demons are free to go where they wish and to interfere with us and oppose us. God actually permits them to do so, albeit within certain limits. Their primary objectives are to tempt us to sin, to get us to be afraid and discouraged, and to render us ineffective as disciples. They especially want to prevent us from telling others about the Gospel. Our battle against the Devil and his demons, is primarily a spiritual one:

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

*Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)*

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

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

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

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

*Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)*

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

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

*Colossians 1:9-10 (RSV)*

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

***Galatians 6:9-10 (RSV)***

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

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

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

***Colossians 3:5 (RSV)***

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

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

***John 12:24-26 (ESV)***

Another agricultural analogy which the Bible uses is to speak of pruning. A rose bush or a fruit-bearing shrub needs to be cut back every year in order to produce the maximum harvest the next year. Cutting back the branches enables that which remains to grow more vigorously and to be far more productive.

The same applies to us. If we want to bear fruit in our lives we have to be willing to be ‘pruned’. That involves having certain things within our lives cut off, or at least cut back. Jesus compares Himself to a vine and says that we are the branches and that God the Father is the vinedresser or farmer who does the pruning:

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

***John 15:1-2 (RSV)***

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



## Preparing for persecution and suffering

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

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

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

*Luke 12:51-53 (NASB)*

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

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

*Matthew 10: 16-18 (ESV)*

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

*Matthew 10: 21-24 (ESV)*

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

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

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

*John 15:18-21 (NASB)*

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

*John 16:1-4 (ESV)*

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

*2 Timothy 3:12 (NASB)*

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

*John 16:31-33 (ESV)*

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

*Acts 14:21-22 (ESV)*

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

*Acts 20:22-24 (ESV)*

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

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

*1 Corinthians 4:12 (NASB)*

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

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

*2 Corinthians 4:8-9 (NASB)*

*We can also take encouragement from the fact that Jesus Himself endured a huge amount of hostility from those who hated Him and His message. He is therefore our main example to follow: Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

*Hebrews 12:3 (RSV)*

*Although any real Christian will certainly be opposed in this world, we can still be at peace, in the sense of being reconciled to the fact that such mistreatment is inevitable. We can take courage from the fact that, no matter how severe it gets, Jesus has already won the main battle. His overall victory is certain. Therefore we already know that we are on the winning side and are contending*

*against an enemy whose eventual defeat is assured. Consider the following sample passages which illustrate Jesus' triumph over Satan and over all that is evil:*

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

*John 16:33 (NASB)*

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

*Colossians 2:15 (RSV)*

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

*Hebrews 10:12-13 (RSV)*

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

*Revelation 1:12-16 (RSV)*

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

*Revelation 11:15 (RSV)*

<sup>7</sup>*Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, <sup>8</sup> but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.*

*Revelation 12:7-10 (RSV)*

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

*Revelation 19:11-16 (RSV)*

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

*Revelation 20:10 (NASB)*

While we wait for Jesus to commence His reign as King over all the Earth, we can be completely sure that, no matter what we are called upon to face or endure in the meantime, nothing can ever separate us from Him. All sorts of things may happen to us in this life, including death as a martyr.

However, He is still with us, even as we go through those experiences. Jesus does not promise to keep us *from* suffering or death, but He does promise to be *with us* during those bad experiences. We will not be separated from Him or have to endure the ordeals on our own:

*<sup>33</sup>Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; <sup>34</sup>who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>Just as it is written, "for your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup>But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:33-39 (NASB)*

### **Endurance and perseverance**

The character qualities of endurance and perseverance are not widely sought after. Perhaps that is because the only way to develop them is for us to endure and persevere regularly until we eventually get good at it. Doing that is not pleasant, but there is no other way to develop the ability to endure and persevere.

Therefore, if we are wise, we will pray for these qualities to be developed in our lives, even though the learning process will be painful, because it is undoubtedly worth it. We should therefore pray, as Paul did, to be strengthened in endurance and patience:

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

*Colossians 1:11-13 (ESV)*

The ability to endure things patiently, and to persevere come what may, are qualities which God wants us to have. They are two of the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit. That means they are not *gifts*. God does not *give* us patience, endurance or perseverance in the way that He gives us natural abilities or spiritual gifts. They have to be grown in us as fruits over long periods of time.

We can, of course, ask for God's help in developing these qualities, but it is still our responsibility to grow them. In other words, God will not give us Christian character as a gift. It cannot be imputed to us instantly, as Jesus' righteousness is transferred to us at the moment when we are justified.

We must choose to pursue these character qualities and to develop them over time. First of all, we must set our minds to want these things and to be determined to get them, because the Bible repeatedly tells us that we need these qualities:

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

*Hebrews 10:36 (ESV)*

*Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.*  
*1 Corinthians 16:13 (NASB)*

*for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.*  
*1 Thessalonians 3:8 (NASB)*

<sup>9</sup> *If anyone has an ear, let him hear:*

<sup>10</sup> *If anyone is to be taken captive,  
to captivity he goes;  
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,  
with the sword must he be slain.*

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

*Revelation 13:9-10 (ESV)*

Note that in each of the passages quoted above the responsibility is on us, not on God, to endure, stand firm, be strong etc. He will help us, but He will not do it for us. But we can still be encouraged, because these qualities really can be developed. It is not a hopeless task. We have Jesus' example to follow first of all.

We also have the example of all the people of faith who have gone before us and who have endured severe trials and achieved great things by doing so. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes these people who have gone ahead of us as being a 'cloud of witnesses'. That possibly implies that they are even able to see us and are cheering us on:

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

*Hebrews 12:1-4 (ESV)*

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

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

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

### **Some of the beneficial effects of hardship**

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

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

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

*James 1:2-4 (ESV)*

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

*<sup>4</sup> But I am the Lord your God  
from the land of Egypt;  
you know no God but me,  
and besides me there is no savior.*

*<sup>5</sup> It was I who knew you in the wilderness,  
in the land of drought;*

*<sup>6</sup> but when they had grazed, they became full,  
they were filled, and their heart was lifted up;  
therefore they forgot me.*

*Hosea 13:4-6 (ESV)*

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

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

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

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

*James 1:12 (ESV)*

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

Another character quality which every disciple needs to seek to develop in himself is *contentment*. That is the ability to be calm, at peace and reconciled to facing any circumstances that we are called upon to deal with. Few people have endured more than Apostle Paul. Yet, he tells us that he learned to be content in whatever situation he faced. However, it is important to note the word 'learned'. Paul is not saying that he was always content, from the outset.

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

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

*Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV)*

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

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

In other words, we are not justified as a result of our works. We are called upon to do good works as a consequence of our having already been justified. So, from the moment of conversion onwards, our greatest duty, and need, is to learn to understand and obey God's written Word, the Bible.

The true extent of your love for Him and your devotion to Him is shown by your devotion to reading, learning and abiding by the Bible. You do not love Jesus one gram more than you love and obey His Word. And you do not know Him any more than you know His Word. There is no use pretending otherwise. The Bible makes this very clear:

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

*John 14: 21-24 (ESV)*

*<sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

*John 15:14 (ESV)*

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

*1 John 2:3-6 (RSV)*

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

*Joshua 1:8 (ESV)*

We are commanded to be obedient to Jesus and that means knowing and obeying His written Word. But how can we possibly do that unless we study it carefully? There is no other way. Therefore we are meant to become firmly rooted in the faith by knowing and obeying the whole Bible. That is also

how we will avoid being led astray by false teaching and false prophets, of whom there are very many, especially in our own day:

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

*Colossians 2:6-8 (NASB)*

It is your duty therefore to obey all of Jesus' commands, including those given to us via the prophets and apostles, because every one of those was writing under God's instruction and guidance. Therefore, what they said is what God was saying. You are also responsible for making sure that you are not deceived by false doctrines. As Paul says above, we are to "see to it".

You might perhaps imagine that Jesus would hold us blameless if we are deceived by false teachers. However, that is not necessarily so, because proper diligence on our part is able to prevent us from being deceived in the first place. Any person who sincerely and diligently studies God's Word will not be led astray.

At any rate, even if they are deceived for a while, it will not be permanent, because diligent study of God's Word will eventually identify and correct the error. However, that will only be the case if you are devoted to the Word of God itself, rather than to your own favourite teacher or denomination. However good they may be, they are not authoritative and they can never be relied on.

Only God's written Word is totally reliable. Everyone else, and everything else, is flawed, or potentially flawed. They can all lead you astray if you follow them and rely on them, rather than on what the Bible says. Therefore, as Paul says, you must "see to it" that you know the whole Bible really well, so that nobody is capable of deceiving you, or at least not for long. Be like the people of Berea who checked everything that any teacher told them by looking to see whether it was in the Scriptures.

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

<sup>9</sup> *For they are a rebellious people,  
lying children,*

*children unwilling to hear  
the instruction of the Lord;*

<sup>10</sup> *who say to the seers, "Do not see,"  
and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right;  
speak to us smooth things,*

*prophesy illusions,  
<sup>11</sup> leave the way, turn aside from the path,  
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."*

<sup>12</sup> *Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,  
"Because you despise this word  
and trust in oppression and perverseness  
and rely on them,*

<sup>13</sup> *therefore this iniquity shall be to you  
like a breach in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,  
whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant;*



*<sup>14</sup> and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel  
that is smashed so ruthlessly  
that among its fragments not a shard is found  
with which to take fire from the hearth,  
or to dip up water out of the cistern.”  
Isaiah 30:9-14 (ESV)*

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

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

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

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

*Matthew 7:13-14 (RSV)*

The narrow gate represents entering into the Christian life to begin with. It means believing the true Gospel, as set out in the Bible, rather than the lukewarm, compromised, counterfeit gospel which so many churches present to us. Their man-made gospel is deliberately designed to be easy. It basically amounts to: “*Jesus loves you and wants you to love Him*”.

There is little or no emphasis on sin, or God’s judgment, or our need to repent and get right with God. Neither do they focus on the cost and hardship involved in a life of real discipleship. Such a realistic and accurate biblical message is not popular. Therefore a worldly church leader will not preach it. He fears being criticised for the things he says. He also fears offending people and therefore losing members. In particular, he fears losing their financial support.

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

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