

CHAPTER 2

A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW GOD DEVELOPS US AS DISCIPLES

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

Hosea 6:3(a) (ESV)

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

Colossians 2:6-8 (ESV)

Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them,
Deuteronomy 11:16 (RSV)

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

2 Chronicles 12:14 (NKJV)

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

Deuteronomy 6:12(a) (RSV)

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

Luke 9:23-26 (ESV)

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

Acts 14:21-22 (ESV)

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

Ephesians 4:1-2 (RSV)

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

John 14:21 (RSV)

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

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 (RSV)

And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6 (RSV)

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

Another point about which we need to become realistic is the fact that not everybody who claims to be a Christian really is one. Many people are false. Many are deceivers and even more are deceived. So, we cannot safely assume that everybody who goes to church, or even all those who lead churches, are real Christians.

Many are not and it is your personal responsibility to identify those who are false and to avoid coming under their influence. One day Jesus will put the question beyond doubt by identifying all such false people. Then they will be publicly rejected by Him:

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

Matthew 7:21-27 (RSV)

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

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

Isaiah 48:1 (ESV)

Of the people who claim to be Christians, they are not all real disciples. Many people in churches are false and you are required to try to learn how to identify them. You are to do so primarily by examining their fruit. You are also meant to learn how to identify their false teaching, by constantly comparing what they say with what the Bible says. There is literally no church member or leader, however eminent, upon whom you can safely and uncritically rely.

Whoever they may be, you are meant to check their teaching against the Bible. Moreover, if they don't like you doing that, then that in itself tells you something very important about them. It would probably be your cue to leave that church and go elsewhere. Consider also this very sobering passage from Luke, in which Jesus speaks of the need to enter by the narrow door and warns us against being complacent:

²² He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of

teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Luke 13:22-30 (ESV)

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

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

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

¹⁸ Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. ¹⁹ And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” ²² And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”

Matthew 8:18-22 (ESV)

Jesus means that when we choose to follow Him we need to give up any idea of having any rights, entitlements or expectations. We must hand over our entire lives to Him and follow Him, wherever He goes and whatever it costs. Consider this very frank statement by Jesus in Luke’s gospel about the high level of commitment involved in true discipleship. He speaks of the need to ‘hate’ our father and mother etc. He does not mean that literally. It is a figure of speech.

We know that, because the fifth commandment tells us all to honour our father and mother. What Jesus means is simply that other people must all be put into second place, behind Him. He wants us to count the cost of following Him realistically, ahead of time, and to resolve to be willing to pay it, before we even begin. In fact, from the outset, we must renounce all that we have and see it as His property. We must then focus on following Him as our top priority, ahead of everything else and everyone else:

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

Luke 14:25-33 (ESV)

For many of us the hardest thing to give up and to hand over to Jesus is our money and possessions. They can exert a terrifically strong hold over us. Nevertheless, we must be willing to give it all to

Him and consider it all as being at His disposal. Indeed, some of us will be called upon to literally give it all away:

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

Luke 18:18-30 (ESV)

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

Being a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ does bring you peace. However, that means in the Hebrew sense of being at peace within, or despite, difficult circumstances. The peace that Jesus gives us does not mean the absence of such difficulties. The Hebrew word for peace is ‘*Shalom*’. It is very different in meaning from the Greek word for peace, from which we get the girls’ name ‘*Irene*’.

Shalom is a much broader and deeper word. It involves deep, overall wholesomeness, contentment, success and prosperity. One can experience *Shalom* even in the midst of severe difficulty or conflict. It is a much deeper and more far reaching concept than what is meant by the Greek word from which we get the word *Irene*.

The Greek concept of peace, which has been adopted by the entire Western world, simply means the absence of war, conflict, hostility etc. That is a very narrow definition of peace. So, a person can have peace in the sense of *Shalom* even in the midst of war, famine, conflict, persecution etc. But there would still not be peace in the Greek sense, i.e. ‘*Irene*’. In short, Jesus does promise His disciples that it is possible to achieve *Shalom* type peace. However, He does not promise *Irene* type peace.

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

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

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

follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ *Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Matthew 10:34-39 (ESV)

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

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

It is the duty of a disciple to be "salt and light" in this world

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

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

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

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

Matthew 5:13-16 (ESV)

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

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

For example many people follow the so called "social gospel". They under-emphasise, or even ignore, anything which has to do with preaching about the need to repent and believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Instead, they focus solely on helping people practically, or on working for charities.

That one-sided approach is not valid. It is a rejection of what Jesus also said about being a light. That has to involve spreading the truth about the entirety of God's Word in a balanced and accurate way. A disciple cannot pick and choose which of God's commands are to be obeyed and which can be put to one side.

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

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

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

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

Malachi 3:2-3 (NASB)

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

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

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 (ESV)

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

We already know in advance that we are going to be judged in this way by Jesus. Doesn't it therefore make sense to try, as far as possible, to bring that judgment process forward into the present? We can do that by judging ourselves frankly, in comparison to God's Word. Then we can simply alter our attitudes and behaviour now, wherever we see that they are wrong.

It can also come by praying for Jesus to expose your errors and sins, here and now, so that you can tackle them and repent of them before you get to the Judgment Seat. If you do that, and keep on doing it, then it may be difficult and uncomfortable for you now, but you will gain greatly on the Day when Jesus Christ judges you. You will already have dealt with and removed some of the dross or the wood, hay and stubble in your life, ahead of the Judgment Seat of Christ. Then there will be less for Jesus to have to burn up and less need for Him to have to rebuke you.

That self-examination must surely make sense. It is also enlightened self-interest for us to seek as much correction and constructive criticism as we can get here and now, so that we can change even more thoroughly. Then we will bear more fruit, amass more “gold, silver and precious stones” and receive a greater reward than we would otherwise have got. Whatever rewards we receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ, whether small, or large, or nothing at all, they will be eternal.

However, any embarrassment or discomfort we receive now by being corrected and changing our behaviour is only temporary. Therefore, one would be a fool to avoid such self-judgment and correction now, merely because we find it difficult or unpleasant. It is the eternal outcome that matters, not the temporary difficulties or embarrassments of this life.

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

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

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

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

Deuteronomy 8:5-6 (ESV)

⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

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

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

Hebrews 12:5-11 (ESV)

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

***Blessed is the man whom thou dost chasten, O LORD,
and whom thou dost teach out of thy law***

Psalm 94:12 (RSV)

“----that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end”

Deuteronomy 8:16(b) (RSV)

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

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

Revelation 3:19 (ESV)

God is very careful in His disciplining of us. He will chastise us, and sometimes it will need to be severe, but He will not usually bring our lives to an end. His aim is to change us and mature us. So He limits the chastisement to what we can stand and what will help us. He does not ordinarily go beyond that:

***The Lord has disciplined me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.***

Psalm 118:18 (ESV)

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

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

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 (RSV)

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

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

how God will deal with those Israelites who afflict widows or orphans. He makes clear that they will receive God's wrath and that God will actually kill the wrongdoer:

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

Exodus 22:22-24 (RSV)

Note how severely God dealt with the wicked sons of Eli, and also King Saul

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

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

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

Samuel 2:17 (NIV)

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

Samuel 2:22-25 (NIV)

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

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

We see another example of how God sometimes reacts to sin in the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus chapter 10. These two brothers were sons of Aaron, i.e. Moses' brother. Therefore, they were priests, as was their father, Aaron. It was therefore part of their duty to offer sacrifices and to burn incense in the Tabernacle. One day they did something which angered God. They disobeyed God's instructions in some way, the exact details of which are not given.

At any rate, they offered fire to the LORD in the Tabernacle in a way which God saw as unholy. In other words, they disrespected God by their actions, or by their neglect to do as He had commanded them. Therefore, as Nadab and Abihu were doing this, fire came forth from God and consumed them. God ended their lives Himself, there and then, at the very scene of their wrongdoing:

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

Leviticus 10:1-2 (RSV)

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

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

1 Chronicles 10:13-14 (RSV)

God also dealt severely with Ananias and Sapphira and that was in the New Testament, not the Old

In case anybody says that this only happened in the Old Testament, let us look at the book of Acts where we see the same thing happening to Ananias and Sapphira. They sold some land and gave some of the proceeds away to the apostles. They claimed that what they gave was the *entire* proceeds. In fact, they had held some back for themselves.

There was nothing wrong with that, in itself. The Bible makes clear that they were fully entitled to do as they wished with the money. They were under no duty to give away any of it, let alone all of it. The sin was not in holding some of it back, but in *lying* about it:

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

Acts 5:1-6 (RSV)

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

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

Acts 5:7-11 (RSV)

Some have argued that Ananias and Sapphira were not real Christians and were actually unsaved unbelievers, who were only pretending to be part of the church. However, I see no basis for saying that. The Bible does not say it, or even suggest it. On the contrary, if they were not real Christians God would have had no reason to discipline them. If God disciplined every non-Christian who ever told a lie, there would be none of them left.

God fully expects unbelievers to lie, but His principal judgment of them will come later at the Great White Throne, where they will be condemned and punished eternally. The main reason why people argue that Ananias and Sapphira must have been non-Christians is because they don't like the idea of God dealing with real Christians in this way. However, whether we like a thing or not has nothing to do with whether it is true.

We must therefore be guided by what the Bible actually says, not by what we would like it to say. On that basis we have to conclude that discipline of this kind can, and does, apply to real Christians. It ranges from rebuke to chastisement, and all the way up to ending our lives. That would send us to our Judgment and take away our opportunity to do any further harm.

What does Paul mean when he refers to “deliver(ing) a man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh”?

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

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

1 Corinthians 5:1-5 (RSV)

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

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

These are controversial passages and there are differing opinions as to exactly what Paul is speaking about. Some say that he merely means that such a person is put outside of the umbrella of protection of the Church. They then receive a buffeting of demonic attacks and eventually realize their error and stop behaving in a carnal way. It may well include all of that.

However, my own belief is that it can go far beyond that and even include the loss of that carnal believer's life. In direct terms, such a death could be caused by the severity of the demonic onslaught against him. However, the indirect cause is that God has permitted it, by removing His shield of protection. Then the carnal man dies and his sin and rebellion cease, but he himself can still be saved.

Conversely, if God had not intervened, then perhaps he may not have been saved in the end, i.e. if his life had continued and his sin had kept on increasing until it reached its full limits and he became apostate. It is a little bit like where a football manager can see that the behaviour of one of his players on the pitch is seriously out of order. Perhaps he has already had a yellow card, but he is continuing to foul other players, make reckless tackles and show dissent to the referee.

His own manager might look at that developing situation and be able to see that it is inevitably going to end with that player being sent off by the referee. If so, that would generate a further ban of one, or even three, whole games, in addition to the current match.

In that situation a sensible manager might choose to substitute that player right now, before he gets compulsorily sent off. That would be upsetting for that player, but it would save him from even

worse consequences, which would have occurred if he had been allowed to stay on the pitch any longer. Plus, it could save other players from potentially serious injuries.

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

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

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

What are we to make of the warnings in the letter to the Hebrews?

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

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

Hebrews 6:4-8 (RSV)

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

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

Also, what does John mean in 1 John 5 when he refers to “sin leading to death”?

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

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

1 John 5:16-17 (NASB)

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

That is because sin of that high level of seriousness may make it necessary for God to bring forward that believer’s death. In other words, God may choose to remove them from this life and take them home early, so as to prevent them causing further harm to themselves or others.

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

Knowing that that is a possibility, however remote, should cause us all to fear the LORD more deeply and to take care how we live. Please refer to chapters 21 and 22 of Book One of this series for a much fuller discussion of whether, and how, a real Christian might be able to fall away and end up being eternally lost.

However, for present purposes, let it suffice to say that we all need to have a genuine fear of God and to be in awe of Him. That includes having a very real fear of the consequences of drifting away from Him. In the context of all that, it makes sense as to why God ending the life of a believer prematurely can rightly be seen as a mercy, i.e. to prevent him from falling away completely and losing his salvation.

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

Not all of the difficult or unpleasant circumstances that we experience are due to God’s chastening or punishment. Some of it has other causes and purposes. One of those is that God allows us to face adversity, struggle, opposition and difficulty as a way of changing us. He allows such things even when He is pleased with us.

As we saw above, it is as if the pressure we face has the effect of smelting us, just as precious metal is smelted by a jeweler to melt away the dross within the metal and to refine the silver or gold that

remains. He does that to make it purer and better. It is also to test its genuineness. God does the same with us:

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

1 Peter 1:6-7 (ESV)

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

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

Deuteronomy 4:20 (RSV)

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

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

Job 23:10(b) (NASB)

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

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

Romans 5:3-5 (RSV)

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

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

Lamentations 3:27 (ESV)

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

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

“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

Isaiah 48:10 (NASB)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.
Psalm 119:67 (ESV)*

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.
Psalm 119:71 (ESV)*

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

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

It would be like an overweight person who has no actual desire to diet but who, nonetheless, *chooses* to go into a health farm or diet clinic for a period of time, where food intake is strictly controlled. It isn't what they want as such. They may well find it very difficult, but it is still what they choose to do.

Likewise, it makes sense that we should take that approach when facing affliction, because anything that God does is for the best, even when He is putting us through an ordeal. However, we need to think very carefully before we actually pray to *ask* God to put us into His furnace of affliction. You can make that prayer, and it is a good thing to do.

However, you need to do it with your eyes wide open, realising the full implications of what you are praying for. God will take you at your word and you will then be sent on a roller-coaster ride involving some white-knuckle moments of difficulty and pressure.

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

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

I made that prayer with my eyes open, fully meaning what I was saying, and knowing that it would lead to some difficulty. I got the idea from listening to a teaching tape in which the speaker recommended it, but warned that we should not pray it unless we really mean it and are willing to pay the price. I did mean it, and was willing to face whatever God saw fit to do with me.

However, I had no idea at the time how *long* that smelting process would take or how *arduous* it would be. It also never occurred to me that God would put pressure on me in my job and business. Somehow, I didn't expect Him to reach into those parts of my life. At any rate, the fact is I prayed that prayer and within a month a series of stress-inducing incidents began which went on for 13 years.

It all began with me discovering that one of my business partners at that time had forged an invoice on the firm's letterhead. It was typed up by him, rather than by the cashiers, and was not entered onto the computer system at all. He did it in order to get a client to pay him personally, rather than the firm. It was an attempt by him to divert money away from the firm and to have it all for himself instead.

I was a one third owner of that firm. I then went to the Senior Partner and reported this to him. He promised to support me when I confronted the partner who had done this. However, when we met to discuss it at a Partners' meeting, the Senior Partner said nothing.

He never backed me up and just stared at the floor when I turned to him and asked for his comments. He made no reply. I could see then that I was on my own and that the Senior Partner had decided to back the wrongdoer rather than me. From that moment, I realised that I needed to get out of that firm.

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

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

They expelled me on the supposed basis that I was causing 'disruption', and they drew up a list of bogus or exaggerated allegations. So, we ended up with the bizarre situation in which I was basically expelled for catching the second partner in an act of wrongdoing and for raising it at a partners' meeting. It was the sort of thing which you might expect to read about in a John Grisham book, but which you never expect to happen in real life, least of all to yourself.

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

Another hammer blow was that my former partners then refused to pay me my one third share of the equity or capital in the business. The partnership deed required that they pay me, but instead of doing so, they made more allegations against me and argued that these amounted to 'counterclaims'. Those just happened to be equal to what I was owed by them. So they refused to pay anything.

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

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

You can perhaps imagine how painful that whole experience was. It was profoundly unjust and hugely disruptive to me financially. I was left with no option but to start again from scratch by opening a brand new law firm. It had no staff, no files, no clients, no furniture, no equipment, no anything. On day one I was literally the only person in the so called 'firm'.

The furniture consisted of a dining room chair from home and my mobile phone was the only phone 'system' that I had. Yet, only one day earlier, I had been the managing partner and Head of the Litigation department in a quite large firm. Nevertheless, I then recruited staff, got furniture, and began to open files for new clients. However, it was very tough, especially as we had very little cash and banks refused to help me.

Consequently, for the first three years of the new firm's life I had to survive in an extremely difficult financial situation. It was emotionally exhausting, always being on a knife edge. I came close to going bust several times, but by one means or another, God always rescued me at the last moment. I therefore survived each crisis, in turn, though only for yet another one to arise within weeks or months afterwards

On top of all that I began to experience severe problems with some of the staff that I recruited for the new law firm. Person after person came in and caused me great stress and difficulty due to their dishonesty, laziness, incompetence or malice. Again and again I had to go through the long and drawn out process of investigating, disciplining and dismissing them.

I found it all very wearing and debilitating, especially as so many of them were so devious and nasty to deal with. The problem was made worse by the fact that the new firm grew so quickly. At its peak, five years after I started the new firm, there were over 80 staff working in it.

That rapid rate of expansion helps to explain why so many bad people got in. But it still doesn't fully explain the very high numbers of bad staff. It was disproportionate, or statistically unrepresentative, in that I got far more than my fair share of devious and malicious employees. I now realise that God deliberately allowed this stream of bad people to get in. Firstly, He wanted to test me to my limits, but secondly, it was also to give me lots of experience of handling wicked people.

The various situations I faced in dealing with them gave me the material I needed to write Book Six in this series, which is about identifying wicked people and how to handle them. So, the long series of confrontations had great value in the end, but the learning process was an exhausting ordeal, which went on for many years.

One of the worst employees I had to deal with was a woman in her early thirties whom I recruited and made a supervisor. I unwisely gave her that role too quickly and she turned out to be both incompetent and disloyal. So we had to dismiss her after only five months in the job. She then issued proceedings in an Employment Tribunal and made up a ridiculously false story as to why she had been sacked. She said that it was because she had worn a short skirt!

That had nothing to do with it. Indeed, I hadn't even seen it. Or, if I had, I hadn't noticed it. She also went to the national media making these bogus allegations about me. One day a journalist actually came to the door of our house, while I was out, and upset my wife by questioning her. I defended the case, in which she was claiming over £100,000, but in the end she abandoned her entire claim and received no damages or costs at all.

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

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

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

Psalm 27:12 (RSV)

In addition to all these pressures, I was also kept very busy as a Borough Councillor and also as the Chairman of the Conservative Association. I had these two roles at the same time as running a law firm and they added a lot to my workload. However, perhaps the greatest pressure of all though came from something so obscure that less than 0.5% of the population have ever even heard of it. It was a legal issue which threatened my entire livelihood for about ten years.

It had to do with the client agreements used in litigation cases. They are called Conditional Fee Agreements ("CFAs") or "no win, no fee" agreements so far as the public are concerned. It is much

too complex to explain in detail here, but the gist of it is that these CFAs were drafted to comply with very specific (and badly written) legislation. If they were correctly worded, and fully complied with all of the minutiae of the CFA regulations, then a law firm would be paid in full. However, if they were not, then the law firm would be paid nothing at all.

There were many cases being reported of law firms whose CFAs had been ruled to be non-compliant, and therefore invalid. In each case, it was for one or other of a variety of utterly trivial reasons. These reported cases came one after another, and caused major turmoil amongst law firms. Each time I wondered if my firm would be the next to be destroyed by having its CFA declared to have been imperfectly drafted in some obscure way.

Therefore, for nearly a decade, there was a “costs war”. Insurance companies and other paying parties were searching assiduously for tiny defects in the drafting of these CFAs, which they could then use as an excuse to get out of paying. If a firm’s CFA was held to be non-compliant, then nothing at all would be payable to that firm for all the work done on that file, for perhaps the previous 12-36 months. Moreover, it would not only affect that one file, but all subsequent files as well, because that insurer would then raise the same challenge with that firm on every other file from then on.

Furthermore, other insurers would also hear of the Court’s judgment and then join in by refusing to pay. So, the consequences of having your CFA declared invalid in any way were potentially catastrophic. This costs war affected most law firms in England and Wales, but mine in particular, because nearly all our work was done through CFAs. Most other firms only did a small percentage of their work that way.

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

It related to some microscopically small details in our CFA. An insurance company challenged it on four different grounds and refused to pay us. We therefore had to go to Court in London to have a judge decide whether or not they should have to pay us, i.e. whether the drafting of our CFA was valid or invalid.

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

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

If that wasn’t enough, I also had to deal with some major problems in the church I was then part of. The leader, whom I will call ‘Rick’, was behaving very badly, including being a liar and a manipulator. I was the Chairman of the Trustees of that church and was therefore responsible for all the paid staff of the church. Therefore it fell to me to try to do something about the leader’s misconduct. (See Book One and also Book Six for further details). Tackling him was very

disorientating and stressful in itself, but he also did great harm to me by telling lies about me in order to defend himself.

On top of all these things there were also many other miscellaneous, one-off pressures and crises too. It was basically coming at me from all directions simultaneously and it was unrelenting. At any given time there would always be one, and usually two, three or even more, crises for me to deal with.

The pressure never stopped, throughout all those years, but God made good use of that sustained ordeal in order to break me and refine my character. I changed a great deal and learned very much. As far as I was concerned, it definitely met the definition of being a 'furnace'. I also believe that that long sequence of events was the direct result of my prayer that God would put me into His furnace.

God took that prayer far more seriously than I had. Even so, as I look back, I don't regret praying as I did. Neither do I regret any of the time spent in the furnace, despite its severity. It all served the purpose of melting me down and changing me for the better.

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

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

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

It's that kind of reasoning that makes people apply to join the Marines or the Paratroops or some other equivalent. I was interested to hear, when watching a series about the American 101st Airborne Division in World War Two, that many of the men who applied to join it expressed that view. They had volunteered to join an elite unit because they wanted to be the very best they could be.

However, choosing to train to become a paratrooper, rather than remaining as an ordinary, conscripted infantryman, meant a much harder physical regime. Many volunteers had to drop out, or else they were weeded out by the Army, because they just couldn't cope with the rigour of it all.

Nevertheless, that minority who could endure it, became some of the very best and most effective soldiers in the army. For that reason, when there was a really difficult job to be done, General Eisenhower often sent the 101st Airborne Division to deal with it.

So, volunteering for a much harder training regime can be the right thing to do, provided you have thought it through beforehand, and are willing to pay the full price. Do bear in mind though that being put into God's furnace is not an entirely voluntary affair. He will put all of us into it, from time to time, and to a certain extent, even if we never ask for it.

Therefore, we can't escape God's training regime simply by never volunteering for it. The only question is whether you should deliberately seek to be given more of it, or just take whatever level of pressure God was going to give you anyway, without asking for any extra. It all depends on how committed you are and whether you want an easier life now, or a better life in the next world.

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

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

*¹⁰If you faint in the day of adversity,
your strength is small*

Proverbs 24:10 (RSV)

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

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

*For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.*

Psalms 66:10 (ESV)

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

You can do this best by digging into God's Word at such times, especially the Psalms. In particular you can do it by speaking God's promises out loud by way of proclamation. (See the later book in this series, on the subject of prayer and spiritual warfare, for details of what proclamation is and how to do it.)

King David is a classic example of a man who really knew how to encourage himself, and how to pick himself up and stay strong when facing a crisis. Here he is at a very grim moment. David's wives and children, and the wives and children of all his men, have been kidnapped by Amalekite raiders while he and his men were away.

When they learn of this disaster, David's men blame him for it and want to stone him to death, which is hardly a supportive response. Yet David does not panic. He gets a grip on his own emotions, encourages himself, and then gets himself ready to take practical action:

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

1 Samuel 30:1-6 (RSV)

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

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

1 Samuel 30:17-20 (RSV)

God is watching all of us all the time and testing us continually. This is true both of genuine disciples and also unbelievers. All of us are being examined and tested so that God can assess us and evaluate our attitude, work rate, calibre, character, endurance, faithfulness, obedience and so on. He even tests the wicked in these ways, not just disciples. Nobody is immune from this regime of examination and testing:

*⁴ The Lord is in his holy temple,
the Lord's throne is in heaven;
his eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men.
⁵ The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked,
and his soul hates him that loves violence.*

Psalm 11:4-5 (RSV)

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

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

Deuteronomy 13:1-4 (RSV)

You need to accept that God will subject you to ongoing "quality control" tests

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

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

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

1 Chronicles 29:9(a) (ESV)

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

Romans 8:27 (RSV)

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

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

You would never succeed in an army career if you never got the chance to experience living under canvas, or even sleeping under hedges, in arctic, desert and jungle conditions. Likewise, it would be a very inadequate training regime if they never let you go on assault courses or cross country runs or mountain climbs etc. The fact that you are subjected to such things is a sign that the senior officers take you, and your training, very seriously.

They would actually be letting you down, and letting your country down, if they did not regularly expose you to such arduous conditions and test you up to, and even beyond, your current limits. One of the reasons why the Royal Marines and Parachute Regiment did so well in the Falklands War, and defeated an Argentinian force which was many times larger in terms of numbers, was because they had been so well trained.

They were far hardier, both in mind and body, than the Argentinian conscripts. The British soldiers, all of whom are volunteers, were used to sleeping out all night on Dartmoor in the cold and wet. Therefore, the bleak terrain of South Georgia and the Falklands did not cause them any concern. It seemed quite familiar, after all they had been through in training exercises.

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

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

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

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

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

What I have tried to do, therefore, is to draw attention to the warnings made by the apostles, and by Jesus in particular. The warnings are *theirs*, not mine. So is the level of emphasis they give to this theme. I have only emphasised these issues because the Bible does so. That said, the best way for you to gauge whether I am guilty of any imbalance is to read the whole New Testament right through.

Ask yourself, as you go along, how much of it is pointing to the *benefits* of being a Christian and how much is speaking about the *difficulties* it brings. Then you *can* decide for yourself what the overall message of the Bible is on this issue, and which of these things the Bible emphasises the most.

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

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

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

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

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

Hebrews 4:15 (RSV)

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

Hebrews 5:2 (RSV)

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

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

You do not become angry, or even feel dissatisfied, when your five year old falls off their bicycle when they first try to ride it without stabilizers. Likewise, Jesus is not angry when we try things and make mistakes. He fully understands and even sympathizes. He remembers that He too had to learn and develop gradually, as He grew up from a child to a youth to a young man.

He was always God, even as a child. Nevertheless, He chose to limit Himself, such that even He had to learn things step by step. In terms of His human nature, He did not begin with complete knowledge or understanding. We know that because the Bible says His wisdom *increased* over the years. Luke makes this clear when speaking of Jesus's upbringing:

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

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

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

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

However, whether He is or not, He will still want us to go further, try new things, learn more, and take more risks for Him. Those will always be His ambitions for us, however much, or little, progress we may have made to date. But it absolutely doesn't follow that He is therefore against us, or impossible to please.

You have only to read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three, to know that there are some people with whom Jesus is very pleased, even though they may not realise it. So, we need to recognise that, whatever stage we are at, Jesus will always want us to become more mature. That is still the case, even if we have already been growing in maturity for 70 years and have come a long way.

Even so, it doesn't mean that He is against us, or that He is an endless critic who can never be satisfied. He is delighted with us at times and thrilled by any progress we make. Nevertheless, He still urges us to keep going, and never to stop growing and maturing. That is the right way to see Jesus. He is infinitely understanding and realistic, but also intensely ambitious for us, as any good parent is.