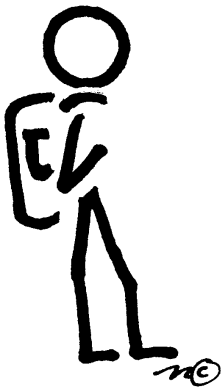
Would you also go away?



Would you also go away?

by Brian Johnston



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1. Ten silver coins and a suit

The young man walked the winding path up the hill. He was heading into the hill country, known then as the hill country of Ephraim. This was a new venture for him, belonging as he did down in the town of Bethlehem, the city of David. But as he walked away he felt an exhilarating surge of freedom. The responsibilities of the service which he'd been reared to perform, with all its biblical rituals, now lay behind him.

He had no particular destination in mind as he walked. He was ready to explore whatever might come along. There was a real sense of excitement in not being able to predict what lay in store. The mood of these days was one of 'doing your own thing'. And that's what he fully intended to do. It would be good to break with tradition – to find himself.

As it turned out, he didn't have to search long for an opportunity. An interesting challenge that seemed ideally suited to him presented itself quite early on. In one place where he found lodgings, his host enquired after his background, likely his accent gave him away as not being local. He began explaining that he was a Levite, belonging to that tribe of Israel which had, by God's initiative, been given the task – even the privilege – of assisting the priests in their duties around God's house. That should have been enough for any man, but somehow he'd grown weary of it. What was it that had bred discontent in the young man? The restless spirit of youth? A sense of needing to move with the times perhaps? Did the careful instructions and provisions of the Law of Moses seem a bit outdated to him, I wonder? Had he inherited an adventurous spirit from his parents? It seems his father had married a woman of Judah, outside the tribe of Levi. They weren't living in any one of the Levitical cities. Did this young man want to distance himself one stage further from living strictly as a Levite? Was he kicking against the reputation of having Moses for a grandfather (Judg.18:30)? Or was he simply making the same mistake each rising generation tends to make: by thinking there's greater freedom in exercising a choice that strays from God's prescribed path.

It reminds me of a professor who once asked his class which of three persons had the greatest freedom. Was it the one who was incapable of not sinning (hardly

likely, since that person would be a slave to sin); or was it the person capable of both sinning and not sinning; or was it simply the person who was incapable of sinning? As indicated, the students quickly ruled out the first chap, because he was a slave to sin. With a little thought, it was then suggested that the person capable of both sinning and not sinning seemed to have the most freedom. But a little more thought caused some to see a difficulty with that. After all, God is not capable of sinning, and surely no-one has more freedom than God, so it's got to be the third person – the one incapable of sinning.

But this Levite thought greater freedom might be found in a path of his own choosing and preference rather than in God's. The Levite was, of course, capable of sinning, and that's what he was doing, deluding himself that this was what it meant to be truly free. Once this young man had explained about his Levitical background, an idea suddenly flashed into the mind of his host. He, too, had kicked against God's laws, the ten commandments. For one thing, he'd broken the command against stealing. At one point he'd even stolen a large sum of money in silver from his own mother. His conscience had finally got the better of him and he had returned it, but with foolish indulgence, his mother had allowed him to use some of it to make household idols – so another of God's commands had come to be broken. He had made not only idols, but a graven and a molten image along with a shrine and an ephod. At this time one of his own sons was acting as the family priest.

This was all far removed from what the young Levite knew well was God's way, but suddenly the traveller realized he was being offered a job by his host whom, by now, he had discovered was called Micah: would he like to lodge there permanently and take over from Micah's son? From Micah's point of view, it seemed desirable to secure the services of a trained, professional priestly assistant. It was so desirable, in fact, that he would make it worth the young man's while. Not only would he receive daily provisions, but there was a salary on offer which extended to 10 pieces of silver annually, and a new suit of clothes each year thrown in.

That seemed good to the young man, and he accepted the deal. Not only would this be a new challenge and a refreshing change, it would allow him to experiment with different religious ideas, ones which weren't constrained by strict biblical requirements. He would gain independence, free from having to comply with others.

Besides that, there was the attraction of new financial security, not to mention a certain status – after all, there weren't likely to be other Levites around there.

And so, doubtless with some considerations like those, the compromise was readily reached. The young Levite seemed to justify the move easily, despite it being shockingly different from his Bible-based background.

This story, which closely follows the narrative of Judges chapter 17, stands as a warning from a bygone age of how easy it is in any generation to rationalize a departure from biblical teaching. The young Levite, whose adventure we've been following, sold out his principles big-time for 10 pieces of silver and a new suit of clothes. We rush to criticize him, but how different are we?

James Patterson and Peter Kim wrote a book entitled 'The Day America Told the Truth'. In their book they asked the question, "What are you willing to do for $10,000,000?" They polled a number of Americans to see if they would agree to any of the following in return for receiving $10,000,000. Here is what they found:

- 25% would abandon their entire family for 10 million dollars.
- 25% would abandon their church for 10 million dollars.
- 23% would become prostitutes for a week or more in exchange for 10 million dollars.
- 16% would give up their American citizenship for 10 million dollars.
- 16% would leave their spouses for 10 million dollars.
- 10% would withhold testimony and let a murderer go free for 10 million dollars.
- 7% would murder a stranger for 10 million dollars.
- 3% would put their children up for adoption for 10 million dollars.

Two-thirds of all Americans polled would agree to at least one of the conditions for $10,000,000. What would you be willing to do for $10,000,000? Hopefully, you would be among the one-third who would refuse to sell their integrity.

The Bible proverb gives us timeless wisdom when it counsels us to '*buy truth, and do not sell it*' (Proverbs 23:23). An inspiring biblical example, which contrasts sharply with the young Levite, is found in 2 Samuel 18. This chapter describes the sequel and showdown to the rebellion which David's son, Absalom, staged against him. Of course,

David wanted the rebellion crushed, but not at the expense of the life of his rebellious son. He gave instruction that Absalom was not to be killed. This is what happened next:

Now Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. For Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going. When a certain man saw it, he told Joab and said, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak."

Then Joab said to the man who had told him, "Now behold, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? And I would have given you ten pieces of silver and a belt."

The man said to Joab, "Even if I should receive a thousand pieces of silver in my hand, I would not put out my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Protect for me the young man Absalom!'" (2 Samuel 18:9-12)

Here was a man who could not be induced to defy his king's command – even for a very significant amount of money. Our Lord and our King, who is king David's greater son, has given us his commandments through the writing of his apostles in the pages of the New Testament. We, too, like the young Levite we began by considering, might be tempted to experiment, to try something new, more up-to-date, more 'with-it', or seemingly more rewarding and successful. It may not be financial inducement, or anything we would recognize as status-seeking, that draws us to compromise previously held convictions, but perhaps we're simply rationalizing motivation that's worth little more than 10 silver coins and a new suit. The Bible's clear warning is: don't sell the truth at any price. The soldier in David's time loved his king and respected his commands. Will we not do the same? Jesus says: 'If you love Me, you will keep My commandments' (John 14:15).

There's a difference between a conviction and a preference, according to the U.S. Supreme Court. A preference is a strong belief, but one you will be prepared to change under challenging circumstances. A conviction, however, is a belief that you will never change. Let's ensure our core Christian beliefs are convictions and not mere preferences - as were the Levite's.

2. Two mules' load of earth

The man was a decorated warrior, victorious in many campaigns, and respected by the king. He was a military man at the very top of his career, but there was one battle he was losing – and that was his personal fight against the dread disease of leprosy. Naaman's home contained the spoils of war from different conquests, but one was to become of special value to him. She was a young girl taken captive from the land of Israel, from among God's people, and she now served his wife.

It appears that she was a helpful girl with a pleasing disposition. When you consider she'd been uprooted from her family at an early age and removed to a foreign land, this is all the more remarkable. She held no bitterness or resentment, it seemed, against those who were now her owners, and from that fact, perhaps, we can assume they treated her well.

Naaman's disease couldn't be hidden. It was the only thing that troubled that otherwise successful home. It didn't go unnoticed even by the young captive slave. One day, when a suitable opportunity came, she dared to say to her mistress that she wished that her master, the army captain, could visit the prophet who lived back in her native land. Before her captivity, she had been aware of his reputation and possibly even had known of some of his exploits directly. She certainly knew the power of God was with him, and often with miraculous results. In her youthful earnest way, she testified of all this to the captain's wife. When she said: "I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy," she spoke with such a clear conviction that Naaman's wife felt she simply had to share it with her husband.

Far from dismissing this idea which had begun to circulate in the home, Naaman reported it to the king. That even the king took it seriously, with full credence, is testimony to the impact the young girl's statement had made. Soon the king was writing



a letter addressed to his counterpart in the girl's country, the land of Israel. And so it was, that one day soon after, armed with that letter of introduction and request from the king, the famous captain set off on what was his most important mission yet – the search for a cure for his killer disease.

At first, things didn't appear to be going well. The king of Israel took offence at the letter, suspecting it was some kind of scheme to engineer a quarrel. How could he possibly fulfil such an outrageous request? How then could he avoid giving offence by his refusal or failure?

Fortunately, the prophet whom the young girl had so well remembered, heard of the king's visitor and the king's explosive reaction to what he considered a preposterous demand. Send him to me, he said. Naaman and his entourage soon rolled up at the prophet's door. Now things are progressing, Naaman might have thought, but his rising mood of optimism soon took a hit. There was no fanfare, no personal appearance by the holy man, no flourish of the hand: instead the man's servant came out to greet the famous warrior in what seemed like an off-hand way, and with some ridiculous talk about taking a bath in some muddy water.

Surely, the military commander was worthy of more respect than this! His pride having been stung with this insult, he turned his chariots towards home. But, cooler heads among his servants prevailed. 'Give it a try, what have you to lose', they counselled him, 'after all you were prepared to try anything, to go to any length to be cured – so why not try this?'

Naaman would ever after be grateful for such wise and courageous servants, and for the fact that he did have second thoughts. He went down to the Jordan river and bathed himself the specified seven times, finally emerging with renewed skin. It was now time to return to Elisha, the man of God, and express his deep gratitude …

When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now."

But he said, "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take it, but he refused.

Naaman said, "If not, please let your servant at least be given two mules' load of earth; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD. In this matter may the LORD

pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter." He said to him, "Go in peace." So he departed from him some distance. (2 Kings 5:15-19)

Through Naaman, we learn that God's gifts, including the gift of salvation, are not to be paid for. They are all of his grace which comes to us through Christ and his cross (see Ephesians 2:8-9).

It's not altogether clear what the thinking of this new convert to the God of Israel was. He admits he'd now have a troubled conscience about all future worship in the house of the false god, Rimmon. He asked for forgiveness in advance, for persisting in doing what he now knew was a wrong thing to do. That, of course, is a faulty notion, betraying an insincere repentance. We simply can't bargain with God, and, in effect, say: 'Well, Lord, I know your Word says 'A', but please understand the way it is with me, I'm afraid I'm going to have to do 'B', I'm sure however that you'll understand.'

Naaman, doubtless, considered himself to be trapped in an impossible situation. His duties of state, and his master's protection, demanded of him that he should accompany him in pagan worship, although his heart was no longer in it, for he now knew better. There are many today, who feel themselves to be compromised in a similar way. Family ties, political pressure, or logistical and geographical challenges, shape their choice of worship. They have learned the truth from God's Word, but cannot bring themselves for one reason or another to give full expression to it because of the situation they find themselves in.

Naaman was not of God's people, Israel, at that time. That racial distinction was significant then. It may seem, accordingly, that Elisha's response to Naaman's request conferred approval or at least toleration. Even, if this should've been the case then, it wouldn't apply today, when Jew and Gentile are now on an equal footing (Eph.3:6), and all are equally under obligation, without exception, to give a full response to our Lord's biblically revealed teaching as to how we should serve and worship him.

We can't be sure what exactly Naaman planned to do with his two mules' load of earth when he got it back home. Was this to be a mere holy relic, or was he intending to build an earthen altar to the true God in that land – one that would be for his private devotions, cancelling out,

as he thought, the times when he would be compelled to prostrate himself still before the idol of a false deity?

Whatever was the case, we dare not expect the Lord's indulgence if we ask for a two-mules'-load-of-earth-type compromise. Our own tailor-made work-arounds may satisfy our conscience but they don't in any way satisfy the high demands of God's Word.

Some say "God will understand that this is where I've always worshiped him," or "It would break my mother's heart if I were to leave the place were she and her mother before her have always worshiped God." Naaman's recorded pragmatic attempt at a compromise cannot be taken as grounds for such thinking. The approach God endorses is a thorough-going one, as when he called Abraham out from his family and country to devote himself to the God of glory who'd freshly revealed himself to him.

Now the LORD said to Abram,

"Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you …" (Genesis 12:1)

Abraham's uncompromising obedience of faith is consistently endorsed as an example for us in the Bible. This is the standard God clearly expects, even to the breaking of family ties and past customs.

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.' Then he left the land of the Chaldeans …" (Acts 7:2-4)

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

Will you also go?

3. Bread and water in the prophet's house

The young man came rushing through the door of the family home, his heart pounding with the news he had to tell. He had seen some pretty amazing things that day. This young man was the son of a prophet, but his father was an old man now. I wonder, however, if in his father's ministry there had ever been a day to compare with this one – one in which he had seen God's message spoken in power and supported by impressive evidences.

He's witnessed at first-hand a confrontation between the rebel northern king, who was now at the head of the ten breakaway tribes of Israel, and a solitary southern prophet. Jeroboam, the rebel king of Israel had rewritten Israel's God-given religious calendar and replaced it with one he had made up all by himself. His agenda was political – and he wouldn't be the last powerful figure to abuse religious ideas for his own political ends.

On the day in question, it seems, the king – contrary to the instructions of God's Law – was personally engaged in offering sacrifice and incense upon the altar he'd made, when suddenly he was interrupted by the arrival of the man of God, the prophet from the south ...

He cried against the altar by the word of the LORD, and said, "O altar, altar, thus says the LORD, 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.'" Then he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign which the LORD has spoken, 'Behold, the altar shall be split apart and the ashes which are on it shall be poured out.'" (1 Kings 13:2-3)

Of course, the king reacted furiously against what he saw as unwelcome interference. He stretched out his hand, pointed at the prophet, and yelled, "Seize him!" At once, two things happened. The most immediately obvious was that, as predicted, the altar split apart, pouring out its ashes. Perhaps it was a few seconds before it became clear that something else had also happened. The king was still pointing at the prophet who had

angered him. But his anger had turned to panic – because it was if his whole arm had frozen at full-stretch, and he couldn't regain control over it. Now the king was begging the man of God to pray to God that he might regain the normal use of his hand and arm.

The prophet, the man of God, agreed to do so, and just as remarkably, normal function was restored to the king. Of course, the king's attitude changed once again, and he invited the man of God to return home with him to be refreshed and rewarded. Many a lesser man would have seized the opportunity with both hands, but our young friend who had been witnessing all this, was surely impressed when he heard the man of God decline the royal invitation:

"If you were to give me half your house I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water in this place. For so it was commanded me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'You shall eat no bread, nor drink water, nor return by the way which you came.'" (1 Kings 13:8-9)

And having said that, he set out to return home by another route, rather than simply retracing his steps. It was at about this point in the story – as the young son of the prophet was retelling it back at home – that his father seemed to get excited and ask which way he'd seen the man of God go home. Then he asked for his donkey to be saddled, and off he rode in hot pursuit.

As he travelled, it wasn't long before he came across a man sitting under an oak tree, enjoying its shade. He wondered if this could be the man of God. Sure enough, the man confirmed that he was the prophet who had come from Judah in the south and spoken against the wrong religious practices of the rebel northern king. What happened next is of real interest:

Then he said to him, "Come home with me and eat bread."

He said, "I cannot return with you, nor go with you, nor will I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. For a command came to me by the word of the LORD, 'You shall eat no bread, nor drink water there; do not return by going the way which you came.'"

He said to him, "I also am a prophet like you, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But he lied to him. So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house and drank water. (1 Kings 13:15-19)

You might think that's all very reasonable. How was the man of God to know that the old prophet

was making it up to serve his own selfish purpose? It had been the man of God's intention to be obedient to God at the first, but now he'd been deceived. Surely that was no big deal? Well, we may think not, but here's the sequel, as recorded in 1 Kings 13:

Now it came about, as they were sitting down at the table, that the word of the LORD came to the prophet who had brought him back; and he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have disobeyed the command of the LORD, and have not observed the commandment which the LORD your God commanded you, but have returned and eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which He said to you, "Eat no bread and drink no water"; your body shall not come to the grave of your fathers.'"

It came about after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk, that he saddled the donkey for him, for the prophet whom he had brought back. Now when he had gone, a lion met him on the way and killed him, and his body was thrown on the road, with the donkey standing beside it; the lion also was standing beside the body. And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown on the road, and the lion standing beside the body; so they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived. Now when the prophet who brought him back from the way heard it, he said, "It is the man of God, who disobeyed the command of the LORD; therefore the LORD has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke to him."

Then he spoke to his sons, saying, "Saddle the donkey for me." And they saddled it.

He went and found his body thrown on the road with the donkey and the lion standing beside the body; the lion had not eaten the body nor torn the donkey.

So the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back, and he came to the city of the old prophet to mourn and to bury him. He laid his body in his own grave, and they mourned over him, saying, "Alas, my brother!"

After he had buried him, he spoke to his sons, saying, "When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones. For the thing shall surely come to pass which he cried by the word of the LORD against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria." (1 Kings 13:20-32)

And it did come to pass, in the time of reforming king Josiah as you can check for yourself by reading about it in 2 Kings 23. But the old prophet's bones weren't disturbed simply because he'd made sure they were laid beside those of the man of God. But what are we meant to learn from this? I think the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians spells it out. Paul writes there:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! … For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man ... but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:6-11)

Remember how the man of God had received a direct communication from God: he was to eat no supper. Then someone came to him who claimed to have a new, additional revelation from God. His mistake was to treat that as having the same authority as the direct, earlier message – even when it flatly contradicted what God had expressly said. Many others have made this same mistake over the 2,000 years of Christianity. World religions and pseudo-Christian cults have claimed to have a more recent revelation than what's found written in the Bible. We would do well to follow Paul's advice: even if an angel from heaven should give us a later revelation, we should reject it. In the Bible, God has spoken to us in his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). The New Testament writings give us the teaching of Christ's apostles which they had directly from him. This is God's final word to us. Anything different, which claims to override it, must be rejected outright. We must take great care to obey as carefully as we can the written biblical commands of our Lord. No change or update of God's New Testament pattern for our service carries any divine endorsement. The good example of the earliest Christians is one of 'continuing steadfastly' (Acts 2:42).

4. A different kind of fire

The day began like many others. The four brothers were already very familiar with their duties. They were Israel's first priests, the sons of Aaron who was the high priest and brother to Moses, the nation's leader. Exclusive privileges belonged to their family. Through them, the people drew near to their God. They were, as always, busily occupied with officiating at the great altar in the courtyard surrounding the special tent known as the tabernacle.

There they presided over the sacrifices which the people brought. There were four or five main categories of offerings and the priests had to know the different treatment and procedure for each type. It was a responsible job, of that there was no doubt, for through their uncle Moses, God had warned how departures from his detailed instructions would spell instant death. How could they forget this? Every day they were reminded of God's holiness as they looked to the back part of the tent before which they served, and saw a column of cloud rising heavenwards. This cloud became a pillar of fire by night, and it was the highly visible token that their God was near, being in residence in that sacred tent before which they served.

But there's always the danger that time-consuming and detailed procedures which we don't fully understand can become tedious to us, tempting us into taking short-cuts. I well remember doing this many years ago with the cleansing routine for contact lenses. I was trying to minimise expense and save time, but I later paid for it when I suffered with ulcers on my eyes.

Two of the four priestly brothers perhaps felt like taking a shortcut – or just doing something different for a change. Their names were Nadab and Abihu. One day, they decided to try an experiment. God had specified that the only fire to be used in the service of his house was the fire which he himself had kindled from heaven on the great altar in the tabernacle courtyard. But was it strictly necessary to use that fire, and only that fire? Well, experiment they did, and the result is recorded in Leviticus chapter 10:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and

offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. (Leviticus 10:1-2)

The fire they offered was 'strange' in that God had not authorized it. They didn't use the fire which God had kindled, the fire on the altar that was always kept burning. It was a fatal mistake, and for it they were consumed in summary judgement. Of course, and quite naturally, Aaron their father is deeply shocked. He at once begins to remonstrate with Moses, but ...

Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'" So Aaron, therefore, kept silent. (Leviticus 10:3)

I find that quite remarkable. Aaron kept silent. He closed his mouth. There was in fact nothing to be said. His sons had not treated God as holy: they hadn't honoured God, and they'd paid the terrible price for that as God's judgement fell on them. This was indeed what the LORD had spoken, and there was nothing more to be said. This is an example of what we read in Paul's letter to the Romans:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God (Romans 3:19).

Today, many take it upon themselves to grumble at God and blame him for whatever happens. But this verse by Paul in Romans shows that in the final analysis all will be thoroughly convinced - the argument will be so conclusive that they'll have nothing to reply; all objections will be silenced. Some atheists have declared that when they get to the other side – should it exist – and stand before God – should he exist – they'll simply say: 'You never gave me enough evidence.' But they won't say that. Everyone's reaction in the coming day will be as Aaron's was back then: total silence.

Someone has imagined at the end of time: billions of people seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, not cringing with cringing shame - but with belligerence. "Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?", snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!"

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched, for no crime but being black !" In another crowd there was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes: "Why should I suffer?" she murmured. "It wasn't my fault." Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world.

How lucky God was to live in Heaven, where all was sweetness and light. Where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man.

Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind.

Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die so there can be no doubt he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word … For suddenly, all knew that God had already served His sentence.

If we come back again to Aaron and his surviving sons, we find that not only were they, too, silent before God’s judgement, but they weren’t even allowed to mourn for, or bury, their sons and brothers. But …

Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, so that you will not die and that He will not become wrathful against all the congregation. But your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, shall bewail the burning which the

LORD has brought about. You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the LORD'S anointing oil is upon you." So they did according to the word of Moses. (Leviticus 10:6-7)

Talk about a tough day at the office! But Moses even seemed to think that such a bad day might just be about to get worse. For, in despair, he discovered that Aaron hadn't followed standard procedures with the sin offering.

… Moses searched carefully for the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it had been burned up! So he was angry with Aaron's surviving sons Eleazar and Ithamar, saying, "Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place?" (Leviticus 10:16-17)

Without doubt Moses was afraid of further judgement from God.

But Aaron spoke to Moses, "… When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the LORD?" When Moses heard that, it seemed good in his sight. (Leviticus 10:19-20)

Surely we can sympathize with Aaron when he says 'when things like these happened to me' – it had been a really tough day – to lose two of his sons like that. In the circumstances, he'd not felt that the holy privilege of eating the remains of the sin offering goat was one that the remaining members of his family could worthily enjoy. If only Nadab and Abihu had been as sensitive as that. Instead they'd conducted an unauthorised worship experiment on the presumption that it surely can't be all that important that we stick closely to God's instructions. One day, we too, will have to give an account to the Lord for what we've done with his detailed commandments. Will we have anything to say?

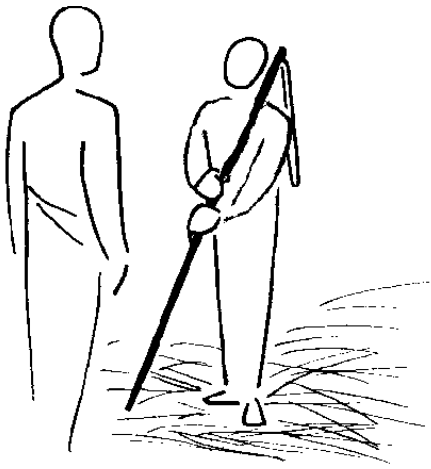
5. Gideon's ephod

It was hot work in the winepress. However, the young man known as Gideon was not as you might expect treading on the grapes to extract their juice, but – most unusually – instead of grapes there was wheat strewn all over the floor and Gideon was beating it in order to thresh it to remove the grain from the useless chaff. I'm guessing it must've been a small harvest. How, in this undercover place, he was intending to fully remove the chaff, I don't know – for the normal practice was to do this on a raised, flat, windswept spot where the wind would blow away the lighter chaff, leaving the heavier grain behind.

But Gideon was in fact being resourceful, for these difficult times called for unusual methods. Ever since their enemy, the people who were known as the Midianites, - ever since they'd gained the upper hand, and grown accustomed to making raids into Israel's territory and to helping themselves to a free harvest, Gideon had developed this subtle technique.

Perhaps this might seem to us as the first indication that God was moving in Gideon's young life. Here was someone who wasn't willing to accept the inevitable. He was trying to save some of the harvest at least for his people's own use. But, even with this spirit of resistance, Gideon could never have expected the visitor he received.

The visitor was sitting in the shade of the old oak tree in Gideon's hometown of Ophrah while Gideon was secretly beating out the wheat. But just who was he? You'd have been forgiven for suspecting it was a man or even an angel – but soon Gideon would have clear evidence that this was a very remarkable appearance of God in temporary human form. When the figure addressed Gideon as a 'valiant warrior' it's possible that





Gideon checked if there was anyone standing directly behind him, because that's not how he saw himself. And when Gideon was told that the Lord was with him, he shot back the same question that still haunts people today – if God is with us, then how come all these bad things are happening to us? Surely, Gideon must have thought, the reality is that God has abandoned us to the enemy Midianites? But the visitor was insistent that Gideon would be the one to deliver Israel from the enemy.

And so in that extraordinary way Gideon was given his commission. Gideon's response was to build an altar to the Lord who'd appeared to him, and to destroy his father's pagan altar. The fact that his father had a pagan altar was so typical of the way things were at that time and symptomatic of why God's people were under the thumb of their enemies. But Gideon was so afraid to make this stand that he had to do it secretly at night.

But, at least he did it. He took that first small step of obedience.

The next challenge was a lot greater, and it came soon.

Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east assembled themselves; and they crossed over and camped in the valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. (Judges 6:33-34)

Famously, Gideon double-checked with God that God would truly help him as he had promised (6:36-40). This doesn't come across as a lack of faith on Gideon's part, but more as an expression of his humility, his modesty, and his nervousness. God graciously gave Gideon the reassurances he asked for, but he did further put Gideon's faith and obedience to the test by restricting his army right down to only 300 men. But, the Lord, as promised, fought for his people,

and the enemy were put to flight.

While in pursuit, Gideon called on others from the 12 tribes of Israel to join in the chase so as to ensure a total victory (7:24). This brought some criticism of Gideon's leadership – as to why he'd not called on them earlier – but Gideon showed quality leadership by handling it both diplomatically (8:3) and with firmness (8:16).

When it was clear to all that a comprehensive victory had been secured ...

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian." But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." Yet Gideon said to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) They said, "We will surely give them." So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil … Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house … And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god.

Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel. (Judges 8:22-35)

The ephod was that particular part of the high priest's dress which was worn when the priest inquired of God. It seems that Gideon being now the civil ruler, desired to have an ephod of his own, kept in his own city, perhaps to be worn by the priest whenever Gideon might summon him to inquire of the Lord for him.

Now this is the ending to the story I want to concentrate on. By now, we're not surprised by Gideon's humility. He was never someone who was seeking great things for himself. Accordingly, he declined the offer of becoming, in effect, Israel's king and the start of a ruling dynasty.

The curious thing is what he did ask for, and the golden ephod which he made from the donated earrings. Let's clarify again that the ephod was the shoulder-dress of the high priest. It was an item of clothing not unlike a vest, in the way a sports vest is worn over a top in order to differentiate between competing teams. By means of the ephod and what was attached to it and what it contained – by such means the priest obtained answers from God as to what his will was in a particular matter when, for example, he was consulted (later in history) by the king.

So why did Gideon make himself an ephod? Previously, he's built an altar and at God's instruction he'd even conducted a sacrifice upon it. Was Gideon now perhaps trying to take over more of the duties of the priest – this time without God's consent? And if so, was this a reflection on the disrepute into which the official high-priesthood in Israel at the time had fallen? Although Gideon had declined official status as a king-like leader, might he have been nevertheless equipping himself with this object as an oracle – so to be able to deal with hard cases in a continuing default role as the people's civil ruler?

And again, if so, with some biblical justification, we may ask if there was any sense in which he wished in this way to be less dependent on having to consult the ephod-wearing priest – especially since that priest was located within the territory of Ephraim from which quarter heavy criticism had come to Gideon during the battle? However, whether intentionally or not (and it seems unlikely that it was intentional based on v.33) Gideon was, sadly, laying the foundation for a return to the confused mixture of belief in the true God mixed with the practice of paganism. And this is in fact what happened after his death when the ephod he made came to be treated as an idol.

Thinking of ourselves now: do we long – or find it more convenient - to personally take on a role which God's Word doesn't intend for, or even permit, us to fulfil (e.g. Romans 12-13)?

Do we sacrifice in some respects our understanding of what God's Word asks us to do, simply because to go where it's being carried out fully would involve us meeting with people we'd frankly rather not meet? How often do you hear of breakaway groups forming because of unresolved church tensions?

In how many ways, I wonder, are we guilty today – as it would seem Gideon was in his day - of making pragmatic or so-called politically correct decisions which clearly compromise the original

purity of God's Word? Are there not times (for example in the areas of gender and marriage) when the Word of God is set aside altogether in favour of the popular vote?

Let's be careful we don't muddy the water for others, as Gideon did. His actions, which were at best unwise, paved the way for the people to sin.

6. A piece of brass

Things were not going well. You've probably experienced it – some time in your life when things were not working out like you expected they would.

It was a not untypical day in the life of Moses, the leader who had led the Israelites out of Egypt's slavery. The story of the Old Testament is very largely that of the people of Israel whom God rescued from slavery. God had promised his people that a land of plenty lay ahead. But it was taking time to get there. That was deliberate, of course. God's plan was to humble his people, and test them, to expose all that was in their heart (Deuteronomy 8:2). So, he deliberately allowed his people to grow hungry, as part of the way in which he disciplined them to test if they would walk in his ways and reverence him. On this particular day, while on a lengthy detour by way of the Red Sea around the land of Edom, the people had just about had enough. Impatient, because of the journey, they complained against God and Moses their leader. To begin with, they moaned about the fact there was no food and no water, and so, of course, as they saw it, they were going to die in the desert. They'd have been better off back in Egypt. The reality was that God was providing bread for them each day, but they didn't like its taste, and they weren't satisfied.

So, things weren't going well. But they were going to get worse, for we read in the Bible book of Numbers:

The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

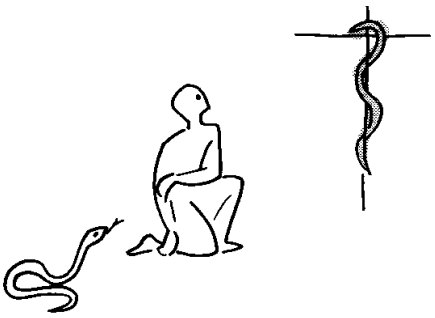
Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:6-9)

This, you may remember, is the incident referred to in John's Gospel, chapter 3:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:14-16)

The snake on the stake, or the serpent on the pole, to be looked at in faith, was a picture of a greater salvation all those years later. It pictured the time when Jesus Christ, God's son, hung suspended on the cross to pay the price of all our human rebellion against God. For everyone today the Christian message is again one of 'look and live': meaning that a look in faith to the Christ of the cross brings the ultimate healing of forgiveness by God into our lives. But let's get back to the days of Moses ...

After this incident involving the snake being raised on a pole, life continued, and the journey to the Promised Land went on. But whatever happened, we might ask, to that snake which Moses had made out of brass? Well, what we do know is that the Israelites kept it.



You might think that the preservation of this relic might, like the pot of manna and Aaron's rod, have remained an instructive monument of God's goodness and mercy to the Israelites in the wilderness. Was that why they kept it? This brazen serpent Moses made in the desert, which had been brought by the children of Israel even into the land of Canaan itself, was it intended that it should always be kept as a memorial of the gracious miracle God had worked when those bitten had simply and obediently looked to it?

I very much doubt that superstitious reverence had been paid to it ever since the time of Moses, for such idolatry surely wouldn't have been tolerated by Asa or Jehoshaphat had they been aware of such foolishness. No, more likely, the introduction of the practice of reverencing the image of the brass serpent dates from of an ungodly king like Ahaz. Did some people later come to misunderstand, or wrongly recall, what'd happened in the desert in the time of Moses. After all, serpent-worship, however revolting it may appear, was far from an uncommon form of idolatry in

the ancient world; and it would get an easier reception in Israel because of the fact that many of the neighbouring nations, such as the Egyptians and Phoenicians, worshiped idol gods in the form of serpents as emblems of health and immortality.

We even can't discount the fact that this bronze snake image might have been regarded as a sacred relic – something to be venerated – simply because it'd been made by Moses. And generation after generation may have heard some distorted story of how a supernatural power in the snake itself had made it a means of healing the Israelites. If so, later generations could easily have come to imagine that it might be of some service to them too in any time of trouble.

If it was in the time of king Ahaz that this relic had begun to be misused then such misuse didn't last long, for we read of how when ...

Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king.

He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. (2 Kings 18:2-6)

We're told there that good king Hezekiah broke in pieces the brazen serpent. It surely took courage to destroy what had become the object of idolatrous worship. He even went so far as to call it 'Nehushtan'. In some parts of the English-speaking world today, we hear of someone who 'calls a spade a spade.' This is usually said as a compliment. It describes someone who talks plainly. Such a man tells it as it truly is. It seems like Hezekiah was that kind of man. In a day when people were reverencing this relic and probably attributing supernatural powers to it, Hezekiah called it a piece of brass, for that's all it was. He saw how they'd been ensnared by it, and drawn into idolatry to it, and by way of contempt, he called it by this name, 'Nehushtan', which literally just

means ‘a thing of brass’. Obviously, he was suggesting that it was only a mere piece of brass – and absolutely with no divinity in it. Such a thing could be of no service to the people in divine things; and, so that it would no longer be a snare to them, he broke it into pieces.

Well done, Hezekiah! He was a true reformer. It’s so easy – in religious matters, as in any other field – to see things the way everyone else around us does. Hezekiah bucked that trend. He was a man of strong personal convictions and outstanding faith in God, which was anchored in God’s Word, for he clung to the Lord and kept his commandments.

There are all sorts of religious ideas that get handed down from past generations. Even to this day, many revere holy relics of one sort or another. When, towards the close of the first century, the Apostle John signed off his first letter saying, ‘Guard yourselves from idols’, I don’t suppose for a moment he was thinking of brazen images. If the preceding content of his letter is anything to go by, his concern at that time was focused on faulty mental images of God – and especially of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. It seems some were trying to split his personality: to say the man Jesus only possessed deity in some temporary degree. Other faulty thinking in the early days of Christianity, which the Apostle Paul battled against, was the persistently attractive human notion that we can and must contribute to our own salvation by the performance of certain time-honoured religious rituals. Much nearer to our own times, another reformer, Luther, exposed the biblical error in that kind of thinking. He discovered from Romans 1:17 that we are made right with God through faith alone, and not by our own working.

Hezekiah’s father, and Hezekiah’s own generation, had got it wrong. Like others God has used to preserve truth, Hezekiah was prepared if necessary to be in a minority of one – so long as God was with him. God doesn’t ask us to follow other people’s pattern of behaviour, but to follow the pattern for serving him which is found in the Bible. Hezekiah benchmarked his life against that of his ancestor David, and for us our model is David’s greater son, Jesus.

7. Seven locks of hair

The story of Samson is one which has perhaps had more than its fair share of exposure at the hands of film directors and song-writers. And the reason is obvious enough. The story line provides scope for imaginative embellishments featuring a flawed hero as the male lead with the kind of love interest that appeals so much to Hollywood.

But the biblical Samson was to be a Nazirite – that's someone under a special vow of dedication to God. The conditions of this vow are spelled out in the fourth book of Moses, the Old Testament book of Numbers. The fact that Samson was to be a Nazirite must be important because it's repeated several times in the early part of his story (ch.13 v.7,13-14).

Let's remind ourselves how the news of Samson's special life of dedication was broken to his parents to be, along with the news of his impending birth:

"For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (Judges 13:5)

This is how the Nazirite vow, which Samson was to follow, is described in the Bible book of Numbers:

All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long. (Numbers 6:5)

Long, uncut hair was to become the most obvious sign of any Nazirite's total commitment and subjection to God. Samson's great strength was not magically produced by his long hair, of course. The secret of his strength lay in God – through his faithfulness to his vow – a faithfulness symbolized by his uncut hair.

It's interesting that in First Corinthians chapter 11, the apostle Paul, in verse 14, cites nature as teaching us that if a man has long hair then it's a dishonour to him. Certainly, then, a man with a Nazirite vow was not seeking his own honour, but was focusing on living for the honour of God. He denied himself, while living as one who was committed to a higher 'law'.

A Swiss lady once advertised for a chauffeur and received three job applications. She interviewed them individually, each time asking the same question: "How close to a precipice could you drive and still be safe?" The first assured her that he could come within 15 centimeters in complete safety. The second applicant boasted that he could let his outer wheel run on the edge and still have nothing to worry about. The third and last candidate admitted that he didn't know, but that he'd simply prefer to keep as far away as possible. Needless to say, he got the job! In those terms, Samson was someone who drove too close to the edge of temptation. The result was he went over the edge. Judges chapter 6 tells us how it happened:

After this it came about that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. The lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Entice him, and see where his great strength lies and how we may overpower him that we may bind him to afflict him. Then we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver." So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you." (Judges 16:4-6)

That was hardly subtle, was it? But it appears that Samson was so complacent that he didn't take it seriously. He toyed with her, spinning stories about how his strength could be overcome by ropes. Then, it seems, he enjoyed the game of snapping those ropes, in an impressive demonstration of strength. But …

Then Delilah said to Samson, "Up to now you have deceived me and told me lies; tell me how you may be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my hair with the web [and fasten it with a pin, then I will become weak and be like any other man."

So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his hair and wove them into the web]. And she fastened it with the pin and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep and pulled out the pin of the loom and the web. Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is." It came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I will become weak and be like any other man."

When Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. She made him sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him. She said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. (Judges 16:13-21)

What a disaster! One which seemed so unnecessary. But Satan knew where Samson was weak, just as he also knows where each one of us is weak. As Samson began to make reference to his hair, he was beginning to get close to the edge – and to toy with the serious matter of his consecration, as symbolized by his long hair. Our dedication to the Lord is not something to be treated lightly. In this way, Samson had ceased to be faithful to God, and so the strength he'd had from God was no longer available as before. The charms of a woman who'd no interest in God, and who was in league with the enemy of God's people, had taken him captive. Samson had been sidetracked and neutralized. Satan had succeeded in moving him away from where he was needed.

The Lord wants each of us to be strong and to remain so for him. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy ...

… be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me … entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also … Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life. (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Samson lost his strength for God by losing his faithfulness through getting tangled up in a relationship that was not God's will for him. It may, of course, be other things for us – perhaps legitimate business interests that begin to take over our life and draw us away from being faithful with our time commitment and energies for the Lord's priority things in our life. Slowly but surely, the strength of our testimony and the vibrancy of our Christian life and witness is neutralized. The antidote is to ...

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness …

After mentioning some by name who had

… gone astray from the truth

Paul continues by saying

… flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart … with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:15-26)

May we stay strong in and for the truth, not allowing ourselves to be ensnared, entangled or in any way taken captive to do the Devil's will – but by maintaining our faithfulness, may we do God's will still. May we be strengthened by God's grace to stay faithful.

8. The bleating of sheep

Samuel would never forget the first time he ever set eyes on Saul. The day before that meeting God had spoken to the prophet Samuel and told him he was going to send to him, on the very next day in fact, the future king of Israel. And when Saul came and approached Samuel in the city gate, he really did look every bit the kind of prince you might expect: for he was tall and handsome. But Samuel, would, I think, be just as impressed by his attitude. For Saul was a humble young man, one who freely confessed his lowly origins (1 Samuel 9:21).

Before they parted company on that first meeting, Samuel had anointed Saul with oil, which was the ritual that marked out Saul as the one who was going to be future king. But when the actual day came for Saul to be announced as king and presented to the people, no-one could find him. Far from being someone to promote himself, he appeared to be very reluctant to take on such a responsibility.

The first test of his leadership came early on in his reign when he met the challenge of rescuing a besieged city. At that time there were those who thought others who'd doubted Saul should be put to death, but Saul refused to allow that to happen. Again that was good.

But then came a bigger test when

… the Philistines assembled to fight with Israel … the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (for the people were hard-pressed), then the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead. But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, "Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him and to greet him. But Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come

within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering."

Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure." (1 Samuel 13:5-14)

This was the first of two distinct instances in which Saul disobeyed the Lord. On that first occasion, Saul seems to have been driven by fear and impatience. The next time he disobeyed is found two chapters later in First Samuel chapter 15 when God told him through Samuel:

"… 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'" … Saul came to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the valley … So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. (1 Samuel 15:2-7)

At this point we're thinking 'well done, Saul. You seem to have got it right this time.' And sure enough, when Samuel comes to see Saul after the battle, Saul says to him: 'I have carried out the command of the LORD' (1 Samuel 15:13). But then Samuel says, 'What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears …?'

What had really happened was that Saul had … *captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.* (1 Samuel 15:8-9)

With that second act of sinful disobedience by Saul, the Lord withdrew his favour. Samuel informs Saul that God has now rejected him from being king. But before Samuel finally turned away, for he never saw him again, he gave Saul this explanation of why God had rejected him. He … *said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of*

Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel, and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal."

Samuel said, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice …" (1 Samuel 15:17-22)

Notice how, Saul first protests his innocence. Then he blames the people. Finally, he adds the gloss that the intention was good: it was to offer the plunder as sacrifices to God. Even if we take this at face value, what it really is saying is that Saul – and perhaps the people – thought they could improve on God's command! God had said take absolutely no plunder, destroy it all totally. (This was because God remembered the treachery of this same enemy people and what they'd done against Israel shortly after God had brought Israel up out of Egypt). So it was a case of take no prisoners, no plunder of people or livestock – but destroy everything, destroy absolutely everything. God had made this very clear, but Saul had decided that rather than doing exactly that, they would save the very best things to sacrifice them to God. So Saul appeared to think he'd had a better idea than God!

This reminds me of an illustration I once heard someone share during a Bible study many years ago. He told of a father who told his young daughter on no account ever to cross the busy main road. Sometime later, on the occasion of his birthday, he was delighted to receive a birthday gift from his daughter. However, his joy was tempered when he realized that she'd defied his instruction and crossed the main road to buy that present in the shop on the opposite side of the road.

Now he has mixed emotions. For sure, there's delight at his daughter's thoughtfulness, but when he thinks of how she's gone against his word, it's a delight that's mingled with disappointment, hurt and even some anger.

The point of that story when I first heard it, was to try to illustrate a situation like the one king Saul had got himself into – one in which a person does something to please God but in the process of doing it he or she also commits an act of disobedience against God.

It may be tempting for us to do what we think will please God, but are we not actually doing what ***we*** please? It becomes hard to defend against that if the way we're claiming to serve God is contrary to the plain word of God as found in the Bible.

While not advocating any form of legalism, how could we begin to justify any course of action that departs from God's Word – whatever lofty motivation we may claim?

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3 … *And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

And what is the true, infallible test of our love for the Lord? Jesus answers, *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."* (John 14:15)

9. Love for the world

One of the most haunting passages among Paul's biblical letters, is found in 2 Timothy 4:10 where he says: *Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica*. The apostle Paul was a 'people person.' He reached out to people, he mentored people, and if you study his prayers you'll notice he prayed for people – a lot. When one of those people, into whom he'd poured his life, turned back and deserted him, he really felt it. A real sense of desolation is reflected when he writes, *Only Luke is with me* (4:11).

We're not told where Demas was from. Some think that because he left Paul and went to Thessalonica this implies he was returning to his home town. Perhaps this was the case. If Demas was from Thessalonica, it would be interesting to compare his life with that of Aristarchus because he was also from Thessalonica. Both may have been from a comfortable background and probably had some wealth, both were trained by the Apostle Paul, yet both men went in different spiritual directions.

Demas first appears in the Bible while in Rome during the Apostle Paul's first imprisonment (AD 60-62). In the last chapter of Colossians there's mention of at least eight believers, including Demas, who were there at that time with Paul – and all of whom were known to the churches in the Lycus Valley. Because of this, it would seem that Demas had been a visiting missionary to the Lycus Valley area.

Six of them send their greetings (Colossians 4:10-14), and Demas is listed with Luke and Epaphras (4:12-14), separately from the three Jewish believers, Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus (4:10-11) – so we take that as implying Demas was a Gentile.

Five of Paul's companions, again including Demas, also send their personal greetings to Philemon at Colossae as well (Philemon 23-24). Among the greetings to Philemon, Demas is included in the statement that describes him as a co-worker with Paul (Philemon 24). Perhaps he had been a 'close confidant of Paul, sharing the Apostle's vision of winning the world for God' (W. D. Thomas, 1983-84:179).

All of this would suggest he was someone who had been a channel of God's blessing to others in his mission work

alongside Paul. But now no longer. Paul wrote that Demas 'forsook him' (2 Timothy 4:10) – he had let Paul down. Why? Because he 'loved this present world.' Paul doesn't tell us which aspect of the present world system Demas loved. He doesn't say if it was fame, fortune, or self-indulgence. Perhaps, he didn't want to embarrass his co-worker any further. But also leaving this failure in Demas' life unspecified in this way meant it could serve as a broad, general warning to us. And we all need that warning – for remember how the Apostle John wrote to believers in Asia Minor: *Do not love the world or the things of the world ... For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world* (1 John 2:15-17). The questions this raises are: "Are we living for time, or for eternity?" and, "Are we living for this world, or for God's kingdom?" The Christian should view the 'world' as often used in the New Testament, as a moral and spiritual system, which is designed to draw the believer in the Lord Jesus away from love for the Lord and any service for him (Galatians 1:4; 1 Timothy 6:17; Titus 2:12).

The world in its cultures, beliefs and values tries to draw the believer away from his or her love for the Lord in one of three ways. The first, the lust of the flesh, has to do with the gratification of the flesh (what makes us feel good physically). This includes sexual sins, gluttony, drug use and drunkenness. The second way is the lust of the eyes (whatever we see that we want to possess) - when the object we want is not ours but belongs to someone else, this comes down to covetousness. And the final category is the pride of life (what we want to be) – boasting about our potential accomplishments. Whatever the particular form of Demas' love for the world, it almost certainly fell into at least one of these three categories.

Why Demas went to Thessalonica, and what he did there, isn't revealed in the Bible. Was Demas' issue more about desiring an easier lifestyle with more physical creature comforts, we wonder? One preacher who lived about AD 400 (John Chrysostom) suggested that "having loved his own ease and security from danger, [Demas] had chosen rather to live luxuriously at home, than to suffer hardships" with Paul (quoted in Oden 1989:176). If this is the case, the lure that Demas fell for was the lust of the flesh because he wanted an easy-going life without self-denial.

Polycarp in the 2nd century AD, wrote a letter in which he listed

some early martyrs: Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, Paul and other apostles, and said that all these had not "run in vain" because they didn't "love this present world" (Polycarp to the Philippians 9:1, 2; LCL I: 295). Polycarp seems to be contrasting them to Demas when he says they didn't love this present world. He's implying, it seems, that Demas didn't want to be a martyr which is why he abandoned Paul in Rome before he was executed. Certainly, just before Paul's statement about Demas abandoning him, he's been talking about his own impending martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Whether or not Demas was running away from hardship and martyrdom, or just wanting more creature comforts, an easier-going life, with a bit of indulgence and luxury thrown in; it's clear we shouldn't try to copy the life of Demas. Instead, we should have an eternal perspective on life and not love this present world system that's out to draw us away from our devotion to the Lord and his Word. The hope of the Lord's return should change the way we live now. Paul, in contrast to Demas, lived his life in the light of the judgement-seat of Christ.

Certainly none of us is immune to loving this present world and leaving the Lord's work and the Lord's people (1 Corinthians 10:12).

For us, it may be some kind of retreat into a comfort zone. Was Timothy also tempted to take things easier, avoiding confrontation? Paul urged him to 'suffer hardship as a good soldier of Christ.' It is a battle. The world is subtle and is our foe. Its values are very different from those of God's Word. For example, society's idea of fairness can be radically different from what God's Word says. And we might be sensitive about being seen to be taking what's viewed as an extreme position; one, perhaps, that others may judge to be lacking in compassion.

This is just one way of 'losing our life' for Christ's sake. Dying in this way is gain too. But how tempting it is to moderate our passion for God's Word! The desire to blend in and be accepted is strong. The world tells us that it considers being a Christian should be all about tolerance – including tolerance of things which God doesn't tolerate. The world today says we are all entitled to our personal view of what's true because there are no absolutes. They've all been abolished. But when Jesus said, "I am the Way (to God)", he was indeed saying that absolutely no one else is the way. Today, inclusiveness is a big issue. Worldly thinking

argues that it's wrong to exclude anyone. But the Bible shows time and time again that sin excludes us from God's presence, and that truth is exclusive – of error.

Jesus said to His disciples, *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Matthew 16:24-26)

Will we love the present world, will we love its applause, and so save our life in the here and now? Or will we lose our life for Jesus' sake by taking whatever the present consequences are of refusing to let the world squeeze us into its mould? It's better to be thought of as narrow-minded, a person of one book, as long as that one book is the unchanging Word of God.

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