

"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." Luke 9:23

When many came to Jesus saying: **"I will follow You wherever You go"** (Luke 9:57), Jesus appeared to discourage them by emphasising the sacrifices and self-denial necessary. "

Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head"

(Luke 9:58).

"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me"

(Luke 9:23).

"... any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple"

(Luke 14:33).

One of the most frustrating aspects of missionary work is the immensity of the task, and the scarcity of the workers. As our Lord Jesus said: **"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few ..."** (Luke 10:2). And so many of those workers fail and give up - leaving the remaining workers with even more responsibilities and a greater burden.

The Lord Jesus declared: **"No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God"** (Luke 9:62). Steadfastness and perseverance are essential for Christian service.

To the Church at Ephesus, the Lord wrote: **"Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love"** (Revelation 2:4). The writer to the

Hebrews, speaking of the life of faith, writes:

"But My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him"

(Hebrews 10:38). A strong devotional life is an absolutely essential foundation for ministry.

"What can I do with you ... your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears." Hosea 6:4

Many Forsook Christ

The Gospels record many who forsook Christ:

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

Matthew 19:22

"From this time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him." John 6:66

"Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them." Mark 14:10

"Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled." Matthew 26:56

Many Deserted Paul

In the Pastoral Epistles, which were written to instruct ministers and missionaries, the Apostle Paul wrote of those who were teaching false doctrines, devoting themselves to myths and promoting controversies rather than God's Word, and of those who had **"wandered away"** and **"turned to meaningless talk"**

(1 Timothy 1:3 - 7).

Paul wrote of those who had rejected the faith and violated their conscience, having made a shipwreck of their faith. Some had even blasphemed (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

Paul warned against appointing recent converts or those who had not first been carefully tested - lest they **"fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap"** (1 Timothy 3:7).

Paul warns of **"hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared"** (1 Timothy 4:2). And against anyone who **teaches false doctrines ... is conceited and understands nothing ... has an unhealthy**

interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarrelling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of a corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain ... who want to get rich, fall into temptation and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction"

(1 Timothy 6:3-9).

In these Epistles, which were written to instruct missionaries and ministers, Paul warned of: ***"having a form of godliness but denying its power"***

(2 Timothy 3:5).

In these Pastoral Epistles, Paul names the names of those who had been co-workers of his, but who had failed and given up: ***"just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth - men of depraved minds, who, as far as the Faith is concerned, are rejected"***

(2 Timothy 3:8).

Paul reported that: ***"everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes."***

2 Timothy 1:15

"Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone ..." 2 Timothy 4:10

"Alexander, the metal worker, did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me ..." 2 Timothy 4: 14-16

Paul had to warn that: ***"there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers ... they're ruining whole households ... for the sake of dishonest gain ... rebuke them sharply ... they claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."***

Titus

1:10-16

Disloyalty and Betrayal are Normal

"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." 2 Timothy 4:3-5

The very fact that the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to include in these Pastoral Epistles so many warnings against divisive and disloyal co-workers, false brethren and deceivers, should be sufficient warning to wake us up to this reality. When so many of the followers of Christ Himself fell away and deserted Him, how can we expect anything less? As our Lord Jesus said: ***"No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also."*** John 15:20

Because of the depravity of man, we should expect sinful selfishness to predominate. Disloyalty is normal. It is loyalty which is unusual. Rather than flinging up our hands and asking why so many give up, we should rather fall on our knees and thank God for those few who steadfastly persevere against all odds. Such dedication is a work of God's grace.

Church history confirms what our Lord Jesus warned about: ***"Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other."***

" Matthew 24:10

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." Matthew 10:21-22

This has to be the hardest part of seeking to be faithful to the Lord. We expect opposition from the enemies of the faith, but not from fellow believers, co-workers, church elders or family members.

"If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it ... but it is you, ... my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship ..." Psalm 55:12-14

"Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel

against me." Psalm 41:9

The prophet Micah warned of the time when one could not even trust a neighbour, or put confidence in a friend, when ***"a man's enemies are the members of his own household."*** Micah 7:5-6

Malice, Conspiracy and Murder

King Saul, who once was anointed by the Lord, later gave in to jealousy and hatred towards David and even attempted to murder him (1 Samuel 18:8; 19:1).

The treachery which Saul showed towards his faithful servant, David, was unfortunately also shown by King David, towards one of his trusted officers, Uriah, whom he conspired to have killed in battle (2 Samuel 12:9).

King David's son, Absalom, treacherously abused the trust of his father, and plotted to overthrow King David, leading to a vicious civil war (2 Samuel 15).

Even one of Jesus' handpicked disciples, Judas, who was trusted as the treasurer of The Twelve, took money from the high priests to betray our Lord Jesus into their hands (Luke 22:48; John 13:21).

Search My Heart O Lord

Looking at these Biblical examples of treachery, it is easy for us to associate these with some who may have severely disappointed us. However, it would be more constructive if we searched our own hearts before the Lord to see how steadfast and reliable we ourselves are, first to God, and then to our family and friends.

"Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position" (2 Peter 3:17).

It is all too common for us to see and condemn the same sin in others that we are blind to in ourselves.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Everything in life is a test of character. Extreme situations expose and bring out the best, or the worst, in people. A person's character is accurately measured by their reaction to unfairness or bad treatment. The measure of a person's character can be seen by the size of those things which upset him.

C.H. Spurgeon said: *"The anvil, the fire and the hammer are the making of us."*

Martin Luther declared: *"I never knew the meaning of God's Word until I came into affliction."*

Spurgeon taught: *"The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction."*

What Kind of Ground Are You?

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23), our Lord Jesus taught that there are four types of people, pictured as:

the hard ground - which does not understand or respond to God's Word;

the rocky ground - which hears the Word of God with joy, ***"but since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, he quickly falls away."*** (Matt. 13:21);

the thorny ground - ***"the man who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful."*** (Matt. 13:22);

and the good soil - ***"the man who hears the Word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."*** (Matt. 13:23).

Time, trouble and tribulation reveal our true character. When trouble or tribulation comes, those with a shallow Christian commitment, will fall away. Others will endure much longer, because their roots do go down deep, but they will also ultimately fail, because they tolerate the thorns of

sin, **"... as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.** " (Luke 8:14).

"the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering, produce a crop." Luke 8:15

How Deeply Has God's Word Changed You?

Here, from the clear teachings of Jesus, we see why some fail and others succeed. It has to do with how deep our roots go into God's Word, and whether we allow the thorns of **"life's worries, riches and pleasures"**

to choke our spiritual life and prevent us from maturing. Are you responsive to the rebukes, corrections and instructions of God's Word? How deep do your roots go into God's Word? What thorns of sin are you tolerating that may be choking your spiritual life?

Those who succeed, our Lord Jesus tells us, are those **"with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop."**

Weak doctrines are no match for powerful trials and temptations. **"Fix these Words of Mine in your hearts and minds ... "**

(Deuteronomy 11:18);

"I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You"

(Psalm 119:11);

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom ... "

(Colossians 3:16);

"For I delight in Your commandments because I love them" (Psalm 119:47); "For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart"

(Hebrews 4:12).

This teaching of our Lord explains why some fall away, but why others succeed against all odds.

Pioneers Who Persevered

William Wilberforce, although afflicted with ill health, and targeted by the most vicious campaigns of sustained hatred and character assassination, by some of the most powerful people of his day, persisted and persevered until the slave trade, and then slavery itself, was abolished.

Against all odds, and although bankrupted by a colleague, afflicted with tropical diseases, an insane wife and the death of his son, William Carey succeeded in launching the modern missionary movement. He established a successful mission in India, despite this being illegal at the time, recovered from a devastating fire in 1812, which destroyed his print house and years of translation work, to produce and distribute over 200 000 Bibles, New Testaments or Gospels in 36 different languages.

America's first foreign missionary, Adoniram Judson, despite twice enduring imprisonment, both by the French and then by the Burmese, being severely tortured for 18 months in **"Death Prison"**

losing two wives and five children to disease in the field, Adoniram persevered. He completed the translation of the Bible into Burmese, and the Burmese-English Dictionary, and established 63 churches, with 100 000 baptised believers, amongst the Karen people of Burma.

Pioneer missionary, David Livingstone, had to bury both his wife and daughter in Africa, yet he persevered in 3 marathon missions - on foot - across the length and breadth of Africa, enduring dangers and diseases which seemed more than any human being could endure. Yet he persevered and succeeded in opening up Africa for the Gospel and dealt a deathblow to the Islamic slave trade in Central Africa.

Plainly, these pioneers were dedicated Christians, whose lives were deeply rooted in God's Word. Their character was shaped by obedience to God's Word, and so, with a noble and good heart, they persevered to produce a great harvest of righteousness.

Affliction is the structural steel of character building

By way of contrast, all too many Christians today live in comfortable homes, travel in comfortable cars to comfortable churches where they hear comfortable messages. A soft and

sheltered religion, afraid to face the storms and brave the heights, will end up fat and foul in the cages of conformity. No wonder so few are able to stand in the day of trouble.

Character and Courage

General Constand Viljoen, one time head of the South African Defence Force, was confronted on SATV about the ruined lives of those psychological casualties suffering from what they called *"the Angola Syndrome."* General Viljoen's answer was most insightful, he noted that those who evidence character in times of peace are the same people who show courage in times of war. Those who are moral failures in civilian life are the same ones who become failures in the military. It is not the military, or the war, that ruined them. The severe stresses and crisis only revealed what was already there - either strength of character or lack of character. Those who fail in war time would have failed in life anyway - the intensity of war just revealed it earlier.

Many young people are indifferent to the church today, not because it demands too much of them, but because it demands too little. There is no challenge in this soft, shallow and selfish "bless me" gospel.

Sacrifice and Service

From New Testament times commitment to missionary service has meant accepting a greater likelihood of experiencing hardships and suffering, and a shorter life span. Half of all the early missionaries who came to Africa in the 19th century died within the first two years. William Borden gave first his money and then his life in missionary service to Egypt. He was dead within four months of his arrival in the field. Inside the cover of his Bible, he had written the words: *"No reserve, no retreat, no regrets."*

Amy Carmichael, the missionary to India who suffered great physical afflictions, being bedridden for many years, wrote this: *"But as the Master shall the servant be, and pierced are Thy feet that lead me. Can he have travelled far, who has no wound, no scar?"*

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps." 1 Peter 2:21

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." 2 Timothy 3:12

"I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Me and the Gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."

Mark 10:29-30

The Curse of Selfishness

Interestingly enough, many would apparently rather die for Christ, than die to self. The biggest hindrance to the missionary task is self. Self that refuses to go. Self that refuses to sacrifice. Self that refuses to give. Self that refuses to die.

Die to Self and Live for God

The only way to bear fruit is actually to die: ***"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me ..."***

John 12:24-26

All of our money, all of our time and all of our lives belong to God. We are only stewards of what belongs to God. Yet all too often, we act as though the money we have been entrusted with, the time that is given us and our very lives are actually ours to do with as we wish, rather than to fulfil God's will. Too many Christians are mainly interested in what's good for them, not what is good for God and His Kingdom. But we are sent as servants. We need Christ's love and we need Christ's attitude (Philippians 2:4-5).

Those involved in the Lord's service need to learn how to wrestle and persist in prayer, how to live and work in the presence of God, how to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need to be self-disciplined, humble, teachable, patient, adaptable and submissive to authority.

We are either those who make a plan, or those who make excuses. We either take responsibility or we pass the buck (blame). When we see a pattern of excusing our failings by saying it's somebody else's fault, or it's somebody else's job, then we must know that the sinful self is alive and dominant and we are far from the mind of Christ.

Why do so many fail and give up? Rather than flinging up our hands and asking why so many give up, we should rather fall on our knees and thank God for those few who steadfastly persevere against all odds. Time, trouble and tribulation reveal our true character. Those with a shallow Christian commitment will fall away. Others fail because they have allowed the thorns of sin to choke their devotional life.

The question we should rather be asking is - How do some succeed and persevere? Those who succeed, our Lord Jesus tells us, are those: ***"with a noble and good heart, they hear the Word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop."***

Let us be humble and teachable, in submission to all godly authority. Fixing the Words of God in our hearts and minds, delighting in God's commands, loving His Law, letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, dying to self, denying self, taking up our cross daily and following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hope For Those Who Have Failed

Is there any hope for those who have already failed and given up? Yes, indeed. In the book of Acts we learn of John-Mark, who was related to Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the son of a Godly mother, Mary, in whose home the church met for prayer when Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:12).

When Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, they brought John-Mark with them to Antioch (Acts 12:25). When Paul and Barnabas were sent off on the first great missionary journey by the Church at Antioch, John-Mark went with them. However, early on in the trip, John-Mark gave up and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13).

When Paul and Barnabas set off on their second missionary journey, ***"Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with him, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas ...***

" Acts 15:36-40

Happily, however, that is not the last we hear of John-Mark. From his unpromising beginning, John-Mark came back and reconciled with Paul, proving himself in the field to become, in later years, a faithful co-worker with Paul. ***"My fellow prisoner, Aristarchus, sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)"*** Colossians 4:10

"Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." 2 Timothy 4:11

From initially being a failure, who caused a sharp disagreement and division between his cousin Barnabas and the Apostle Paul, John-Mark went on to repent, to restore, to make restitution and to rebuild Paul's trust in him. So much so that Paul, in his pastoral letter to Timothy, describes Mark as ***"helpful to me in my ministry."*** Paul also mentions Mark as one of his co-workers in Philemon.

He also later became an important co-worker under the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and under his authority, the author of the Gospel of Mark.

Failure does not need to be final. By God's grace, our sins can be forgiven and our weakness can be turned to strength in Him.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our Faith." Hebrews 12:1-2

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This article is taken from the book [Character Assassins](#); by Peter Hammon and Brian Abshire