

Profiles in Faithfulness

by

Daniel J. Lewis

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In the final book of the Bible, John describes the followers of the Lamb as “called, chosen and faithful” (Rv. 17:14). These three words encapsulate the essence of being a genuine Christian. The first word “called” refers to what God does as the sovereign Lord. He calls sinners to himself, and indeed, Jesus described his messianic ministry in just those terms (Mt. 9:13//Mk. 2:17//Lk.5:32). At Pentecost, Peter preached that repentance and baptism and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit was for all whom God would call (Ac. 2:38-39). To the Romans, Paul described his apostolic ministry as calling people from among the Gentiles to the obedience of faith (Ro. 1:5), and to the Corinthians, he further describes his service to this divine call, as he put it, “...as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Co. 5:20). This calling is a call to belong to Jesus Christ (Ro. 1:6; 1 Co. 1:9). It is the privilege of being called as God’s saints, his “holy ones” (Ro. 1:7). It is a calling according to God’s divine purpose (Ro. 8:28-30), and it includes both Jewish and non-Jewish people (Ro. 9:24; 1 Co. 1:24). Both are called to be God’s holy people (2 Ti. 1:9), and they are blessed with a vibrant hope (Ep. 1:18; 4:4; 1 Ti. 6:12; 1 Pe. 5:10). Ultimately, everyone called by God is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus (1 Pe. 2:21).

The second word, “chosen,” is closely related to the first one. It is the ancient word describing God’s people Israel in which God singled out the descendents of Jacob to be his holy people that they might serve him (Ex. 19:3-6). The same language that was used of ancient Israel is now used for all of God’s people in Christ Jesus—those scattered through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia and beyond. They are now God’s new chosen people (1 Pe. 1:2; 2:9-10). God’s people, who were chosen by grace (Ro. 11:5), are eternally safe, for no one can bring a charge against them (Ro. 8:33). All who belong to Christ belong to this special group (Col. 3:12; 1 Th. 1:4-5).

The word “faithful,” the third word in the series, is one of those familiar yet elusive words in the Bible appearing many times but often not closely defined. It is part of an important word group in both the Old and New Testaments, describing individuals who lived out a life of godliness in response to being called and chosen by God. Faithfulness is a combination of loyalty, commitment and what has been called “a long obedience in the same direction.” In the Hebrew Bible it usually translates the word אֱמִינָה (=

steadiness, reliability, honesty, conscientiousness). In the Psalms, this deep-seated value is most often used to describe God, but it also is used to describe people, such as Moses, who was “faithful in all God’s house” (Nu. 12:7). The opposite, of course, is to be undependable, disloyal and fickle. In the New Testament, the word faithful is translated from πιστός (= faithful, worthy of trust), which in turn is derived from the word πίστις (= faith, what evokes trust).

This quality of discipleship is increasingly rare, even among those who belong to God’s people. Deep-seated loyalty, trustworthiness and conscientious integrity that remain steady through the years is in short supply in a culture that prides itself on innovation, rapid change and creative alternatives. Widespread unfaithfulness in domestic life parallels widespread unfaithfulness in church life. Hence, a survey of the some of the biblical people who serve as our mentors and godly examples as well as a few who serve as examples of what we want to avoid is in order to encourage and strengthen us toward this profound quality.

Faithfulness in Waiting on God (Abraham)

Faithfulness when Things Go Very Wrong (Joseph)

Faithfulness in the Face of Great Loss (Job)

Faithlessness Along the Journey (Israel in the Desert)

Faithfulness to a True Friend (David, Jonathan and Mephibosheth)

Faithfulness When One is Betrayed (Psalm 55)

Faithfulness Over a Long Time (Jeremiah and the Recabites)

Faithfulness When it is Unpopular (When the Crowds Abandoned Jesus)

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Faithfulness in Support (Paul and the Philippians)

Faithfulness When Abandoned (Paul and the Christians in Asia)

The Ultimate Faithful Witness (Christ)

FAITHFULNESS IN WAITING ON GOD

(Abraham)

Waiting on God—remaining trustful in spite of the fact that God does not respond to our desires as quickly as we might like—is a required task of true discipleship. God acts on behalf of those who wait for him (Is. 64:4), but the task of the faithful is, in fact, to wait (Is. 40:31, KJV). Sometimes such waiting might be for a particular span of time, such as, when a woman was restricted from the sanctuary for two weeks plus 66 days after giving birth to a daughter (Lv. 12:5). At other times, the waiting period was indefinite, as when Habakkuk was instructed to wait for the unveiling of God’s purposes in history (Ha. 2:3; 3:16). Indeed, faithfulness expressed in patient waiting was the equivalent to “living by faith” (Ha. 2:4). Probably the longest single example of waiting was when God’s people awaited the coming of the Messiah (Lk. 2:25).

The earliest clear example of this spiritual discipline was the long period of twenty-five years between God’s promise of a son to Abraham and its fulfillment (Ge. 12:4; 21:5). These twenty-five years were marked by a growing impossibility that it would happen at all. Repeated threats to the promise punctuate the Genesis narratives, and all during this time, Abraham waited patiently (cf. He. 6:15). Indeed, the words “wait” and “patience” are often linked in the Bible (e.g., Ps. 37:7; 40:1; Ro. 8:25). The initial threat, of course, was Sarah’s sterility (Ge. 11:30). In the face of this dilemma, various alternative solutions were explored. Abraham considered the possibility of slave adoption (Ge. 15:2-3). Sarah contrived to have a child by proxy (Ge. 16:1-2). In the first case, Yahweh appeared to Abraham, telling him that the promised son would come from his own body (Ge. 15:4). In the second, he revealed to Abraham that the promised son would come through Sarah (Ge. 17:15-19). There were significant threats as well, such as, when Sarah was taken into Pharaoh’s harem (Ge. 12:14-20), and later, when Sarah was taken into the harem of Abimelech (Ge. 20:1-7). Both Abraham’s and Sarah’s advancing age—long past the typical age of human reproduction—made the promise even harder to believe (Ge. 18:11-12; cf. 17:17).

In spite of all this, Abraham believed God’s promise (Ge. 15:6); indeed, this was the greatest thing Abraham ever did—he believed God!

Centuries later, when St. Paul reflected on this patriarch of faith, he said that Abraham did not waver through unbelief. “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed!” He was completely persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised (Ro. 4:18-21). Abraham’s entire life after God’s promise was a life of faithfulness and trust, and his faithfulness to God was a reflection of his own confidence that God, who had made the promise, could be fully trusted as well (He. 11:11).

This link between faithfulness and faith, between faithfulness and patient waiting, is forged in the life of discipleship. Taking matters into one’s own hands, like Sarah attempted to do with Hagar, is not an expression of faith and often results in complications that are unnecessary. The process of patiently waiting on God builds into the believer the godly stamina necessary as he/she awaits the return of the Lord (Ja. 5:7-8; He. 9:28).

FAITHFULNESS WHEN THINGS GO VERY WRONG

(Joseph)

The story of Joseph is one of the earliest examples of unjust human suffering. The narrative is offered in the larger context of the family of Abraham and Jacob and how, in spite of the promise that the land of Canaan was to belong to their heirs, the family ended up in Egypt. Joseph is the pivotal figure. As the eleventh son of Jacob, Joseph typically would have been regarded as one of the least of Jacob’s progeny. As it turned out, through God’s providence he emerged as the one who saved the entire family.

The stories begin when Joseph was just seventeen years old. Because he was the son born during Jacob’s advanced years and from Jacob’s favorite wife, Joseph was favored more than his siblings (Ge. 37:3-4). It did not help that Joseph had been something of a tattletale on his older brothers (Ge. 37:2) and unwisely shared his dreams that someday he would rule them all (Ge. 37:5-11). This situation developed a latent but deadly animosity on the part of Joseph’s brothers, though Joseph himself seemed blissfully unaware of any impending crisis. The crisis came, nonetheless. Joseph’s brothers found opportunity to sell him to slave trading merchants bound for Egypt, and they deceived their father into thinking Joseph had been killed by a wild animal (Ge. 37:25-36).

Things briefly were better for Joseph, and then they were worse. Though he advanced in the service of his Egyptian master, Potiphar, when the master's wife set designs upon Joseph, he was cast into prison for attempted rape, a completely false charge (Ge. 39). In time, however, he was promoted in the court of the Pharaoh due to his skill at dream interpretation. Joseph, of course, derived this skill from God himself (Ge. 40:8; 41:16, 38-39). At last, he was elevated as the vizier of all Egypt by the time he was 30 years old (Ge. 42:46).

During all this movement from hated brother to slave to an incredible rise to power, Joseph maintained his faith in the God of his childhood. His circumstances seemingly went from bad to worse. To be cast out and sold into slavery by his own flesh and blood must have been a daunting psychological blow, not to mention the loss of freedom itself. To be accused of molesting his Egyptian master's wife, when he had gone out of his way to avoid any compromising situation, must have been terribly frustrating (Ge.39:7-12). Slavery, false accusation and imprisonment were heavy loads to bear! While in prison, even though he was helpful toward a fellow-prisoner who later was released, this prisoner forgot all about Joseph's request that he should plead his case (Ge. 40:14-15, 23).

All this changed, of course, when he was promoted to the second most powerful figure in Egypt (Ge. 41:41-43). Here, however, Joseph faced yet another temptation—the temptation to exact revenge upon those who had hurt him. This strange opportunity came about when his brothers, who by this time thought he was dead (cf. Ge. 42:13, 22), were forced to travel to Egypt for food during a severe drought. Joseph recognized them immediately, though they would hardly have known him, no longer a seventeen-year old boy, but now a grown man clad in the robes of unlimited power. Joseph, for his part, was content to test them to see if they had experienced any change of heart (Ge. 42-44). In finally revealing himself to his brothers who had sold him out, Joseph's statements are powerful examples of the exalted character of reconciliation and forgiveness (Ge. 45:4-15). When at last Jacob died in Egypt in his old age, the brothers once more were apprehensive to see if the passing of their father would produce any change in Joseph's generous attitude (Ge. 50:15). Joseph had not changed, however, and he reiterated to his whole family his firm belief that all his troubles were arranged by God in order that he might be a savior to his people (Ge. 50:18-21). In such a striking way, Joseph's troubles and willingness to forgive parallels the troubles and forgiveness of another figure yet to come, Christ Jesus, the Messiah, who suffered and his enemies.

Faithfulness when things go very wrong is never a sign of the impotence of God. God always is the sovereign Lord. The fact that he permits things to go wrong in a fractured world, but steps in to accomplish his divine purpose of salvation in spite of human shortfall, is a sign of his saving grace. Redemption would have no meaning apart from the fact that in a fallen world, things go very wrong.

FAITHFULNESS IN THE FACE OF GREAT LOSS

(Job)

Job, whom James reminds us was a man of great perseverance (cf. Ja. 5:11), faced catastrophic losses. In a series of strokes on a single day, he lost his wealth and his children (Job 1:13-19). On another day, he lost his health (Job 2:7). Usually, treatments of the Book of Job focus upon the problem of unjust suffering, as is surely appropriate, since Job was a righteous man. He was so committed to righteousness that he sacrificed regularly in behalf of his children just in case they should sin (Job 1:4-5). When the first catastrophe happened, Job bowed to the ground in worship, refusing to indulge in reckless accusations against God (Job 1:20-22). When the second catastrophe happened and his wife urged him to give up, he reprimanded her for her effrontery (Job 2:9-10).

In tedious arguments with his friends, who urged that these heavy blows must be judgments (Job 4:7; 5:17; 8:4, 20; 11:1-6, 13-15), Job persisted in defending his innocence (Job 6:24-25; 12:1-3; 13:4-5, 19; 16:1-4; 21:34; 27:5-6). Through all this, Job persisted in his faithfulness to God (Job 13:15a; 14:14-17; 19:23-27; 27:1-4). In the end, as all who have read the book know, God appeared to Job in the whirlwind (Job 38:1ff.). At last, Job was comforted by the truth that God was aware of him and his suffering (Job 42:1-6). God rebuked Job's friends, because they were wrong in their accusations against Job (Job 42:7-9), and he restored Job's family and prosperity (Job 42:10ff.).

The Book of Job does not tell us how long Job's trial lasted. No years, either at the beginning or end, are offered. Still, the impression one receives in reading the book is that this trial was not short-lived. It was during this long crucible that Job's perseverance shone brightest. He simply would not

give up on his integrity before Almighty God, and he would not give up his dependence upon God either! He certainly struggled with the deep questions of existence, especially continued existence in the midst of abject misery (Job 3:11-13, 23-26). He prayed for sympathy, as is surely understandable (Job 6:1-4). He pled for support from his friends, a support of which he was completely deprived (Job 6:14-15a). He questioned his ability as a human to justify himself before God (Job 9:1-3, 14-16, 20). He yearned for someone who would stand between him and God, somehow acting as an arbitrator who could, as it were, “lay his hand upon us both” (Job 9:33-35). He wondered if somehow God derived pleasure from seeing him suffer (Job 10:3). Yet, through it all, he persevered, clinging to his faith and demonstrating his faithfulness. If anyone in the whole Bible can be said to have sustained a long obedience in the same direction in the midst of the most acute and demoralizing circumstances, that man surely was Job!

One of the important things Job did at the end of his trial was to pray for his friends—the very same friends who left him bereft of support (Job 42:8-9). Indeed, it was after Job prayed for his friends that God restored him (Job 42:10). Centuries later, Ezekiel would hold Job up as an example of righteous perseverance in the midst of devastating circumstances, a perseverance comparable to Noah and Daniel (Eze. 14:14, 20). Job’s perseverance stood in sharp contrast to the fickleness of Judah and Israel, who continually vacillated from obedience to disobedience. Like Jesus said about the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites, who would rise up in judgment against his own generation (cf. Mt. 12:41-42//Lk. 11:31-32), Job remained as a sign of condemnation to the Israelites, his faithfulness a blunt contrast to their fickleness.

FAITHLESSNESS ALONG THE JOURNEY

(Israel in the Desert)

God’s intent for the Israelites in their sojourn in the desert was to humble them and test what was in their hearts (Dt. 8:2-5). This test they repeatedly failed. Their first failures were over food and drink (Ex. 15:22-24; 16:2-3). God’s provision did not change their mindset, and they continued to complain against Moses (Ex. 17:1-4). While Moses was on the mountain, the people fell into idolatry (Ex. 32:1-4). When they left the holy

mountain, some continued to complain, and God's fire consumed them until Moses' interceded in their behalf (Nu. 11:1-3). When they complained about the manna (Nu. 11:4-6), God gave them quail, though he also judged them with a plague for their unfaithfulness (Nu. 11:33). When they rebelled against his word to enter Canaan and even threatened to stone Moses (Nu. 14:2-4, 10a), Moses again prayed for their forgiveness (Nu. 14:13-19). God indeed did forgive them (Nu. 14:20), but he also sentenced them to finishing out their lives in the desert of Sinai (Nu. 14:21-23). God knew that in grumbling against Moses they were grumbling against him (Nu. 14:26-35). Some came as a group to oppose Moses, complaining that Moses was no greater than the rest of them (Nu. 16:1-3), and God's fire destroyed the rebels (Nu. 16:35). The people then blamed Moses because God had judged the rebels (Nu. 16:41), and at this point, God told Moses to stand aside and he would destroy them all (Nu. 16:43-44). Indeed, a divine plague already had begun to infiltrate the congregation, but Moses interceded again, placing Aaron as the priest standing between the living and the dead until the plague stopped (Nu. 16:48). Yet again they complained about their food, and God sent venomous snakes as a judgment on them (Nu. 21:4-6). Once more, Moses the man of God prayed for them (Nu. 21:7). No wonder, then, that God said he tested them to know what was in their hearts! He led them through that great and terrible desert so that they might discover that they did not live by bread alone, but by every word from God's mouth (Dt. 8:3).

Ever after, their unfaithfulness was a grievous memory, for they were a stubborn and rebellious people (Ps. 78:8, 17-22, 32-33, 36-37, 40-43, 56-57; 106:7, 13-23, 32). Their faithlessness was not only a sign to the ancient world, it was equally a sign to Christian believers that they should not fail in the same way (1 Co. 10:6-13). The one who spoke to them also speaks to us, and we are obliged to listen intently (He. 12:25; 13:17).¹

Faithfulness—this long obedience in the same direction—is not merely advisable: it is critical to spiritual development and spiritual progress. Those who do not remain faithful, preferring, as it were, to “live by bread alone,” short-change themselves and stymie the inward work of the Holy Spirit. Rationalizations about why unfaithfulness is (“in this case”) is justifiable do not compensate for the spiritual short-fall.

¹ The verb ἀγρυπνέω (= to be vigilant, to watch) is derived from the word ἀγρυπνία (= sleeplessness). Leaders “watch” in the sense of “losing sleep” for those under their charge.

FAITHFULNESS TO A TRUE FRIEND

(David, Jonathan and Mephibosheth)

Religiously speaking, we nearly always think of faithfulness with respect to one's relationship with God. However, "vertical" faithfulness is very often directly reflected in "horizontal" faithfulness, and nowhere is such faithfulness more evident than in the deep friendship of David and Jonathan.

1 Samuel 20 is an extended account of how David, through the help of Jonathan, preserved his life but became a confirmed outlaw. When Saul came to Ramah to capture David, David fled to Jonathan for counsel and assistance. Saul habitually discussed his intended plans with Jonathan, his son, and so Jonathan agreed to inform David as to whether Saul's mad obsession was a temporary aberrance or a permanent one. Together, they entered into a covenant with appropriate oaths before Yahweh. They arranged a signal by which to communicate Jonathan's intelligence to David about Saul.

Closely associated with the idea of covenant is the Hebrew word *hesed* (= loyal love, faithfulness). Older translations usually translated this word as "mercy" or "lovingkindness," but while such definitions are not inaccurate, they do not do full justice to the essence of the word in the context of covenantal or personal relationships. Even the translations "love" or "unfailing love," which one finds in the modern translations, do not always give the complete idea. Primarily, *hesed* should be understood as covenant-love, that is, determined faithfulness to a covenant. The idea is not that of emotion but rather of keeping faith regardless of circumstances. *Hesed* is love that is strong, firm and steadfast. The *hesed* of God is not merely his mercy but his unbending loyalty to his covenantal obligations. In the psalms associated with David, *hesed* appears frequently in praise to Yahweh whose love will not fail. This is why David declares, "Your covenant-love is better than life" (Ps. 63:3). Thus, the word *hesed*, as it appears in 1 Sa. 20:14, 15, comes in the context of the covenant that David made with Jonathan.

While David hid in a field, Jonathan fulfilled his promise to draw out the intentions of his father. In the altercation that followed, Saul became so

inflamed that he attempted to kill his own son. Jonathan then knew beyond doubt that David must remain a fugitive as long as his father Saul was alive. He was angry and grieved, but there was no alternative except to warn David to flee for his life. David had no choice but to become a confirmed outlaw. He could not remain loyal to Saul, else Saul would have him killed. He could not remain faithful to his military rank for the same reason. If he was to survive, he had to turn against the word of his king.

After Jonathan had given the signal of the long bowshot, he and David had a brief but anguished parting. No longer could they be free in their friendship. As far as Scripture records, only once after this did David and Jonathan meet face to face, and that was when Jonathan sought out David in one of his many hideouts to encourage him in the Lord (1 Sa. 23:15-18).

Years later, when David showed benevolence toward Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth, his action was motivated by *hesed*, his covenant love (2 Sa. 9:1, 7). When David said, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show *hesed*," he did so in the context of the covenant he had made with Jonathan. The word *hesed* appears three times in this passage (9:1, 3, 7).

David's act of *hesed* was demonstrated toward a surviving, crippled son of Jonathan named Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth had been injured in both feet at the tender age of five, when a nurse had dropped him as she was fleeing at the news of Jonathan's death (2 Sa. 4:4). Now, his disability was relieved as David made him a royal pensioner. All the properties previously belonging to Saul's family David restored to Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth became part of the king's retinue and ate with the princes.

Such faithfulness—such covenant love—is in short supply in our shopping mall culture. Families, churches and even personal friends frequently sever relationships over such secondary issues, and usually, the breaking point is the selfish interests of one against the other. God, on the other hand, is characterized by faithful love, and when humans who love God behave at their best, they demonstrate this same loyalty, just as David did!

FAITHFULNESS WHEN ONE IS BETRAYED

(Psalm 55)

The Psalms, the prayer book of ancient Israel, plumbs the extremities of human experience. In this case, the experience is betrayal by a friend. Here, David lays bare his heart and the painful reality of having trusted someone who in turn was untrustworthy. While there is no specific heading or internal statement in the Psalm to provide a definite historical context, a very good candidate would be the time of David's abdication of the throne during the Absalom revolt. Absalom, David's third son (1 Sa. 3:3), had killed David's oldest son in an act of vengeance for the rape of his sister (2 Sa. 13). Fleeing to the ancestral home of his grandparents, Absalom remained estranged from his father David for three years (2 Sa. 13:38-39). When at last he was allowed to return to Jerusalem (2 Sa. 14), he set about instigating a conspiracy against the throne, forcing David to abdicate (2 Sa. 15). In the midst of this debacle, David and his retainers abandoned the capital, crossing the Jordan River and escaping to the Gileadite stronghold of Mahanaim. During the flight, as David and his people were crossing the Mt. of Olives, the news was revealed that Ahithophel, one of David's counselors, was among the conspirators (2 Sa. 15:31; cf. 15:12). While there is no way to know for sure if this historical circumstance lies behind Psalm 55, it might well have been. Ahithophel had served as David's personal counselor in his cabinet (1 Chr. 27:33), so he had an intimate and long-standing knowledge of the king.

What would make such a counselor turn traitor? Perhaps Ahithophel felt that David, because of his own failures in the affair involving Bathsheba, was unfit to continue as the king. Perhaps he saw some personal advantage if Absalom should successfully pull off his conspiracy. In any case, he did not accompany David on his flight, but joined the rebellion of Absalom.

Against just such a background, or at least one similar, the prayer in Psalm 55 was composed. It is to the point that the Psalmist takes his concern to God rather than taking matters into his own hands. Indeed, during his flight, David refused to defend himself against slurs and accusations. He even invited one of his retainers, a mercenary, to stay in Jerusalem with Absalom, since as a foreigner Ittai had no compelling reason to be loyal to David (2 Sa. 15:19-20). Ittai remained loyal nonetheless (2 Sa. 15:21). When a descendent of Saul's family, Shimei, took advantage of the opportunity to shame David, cursing and throwing dirt clods and rocks at the fleeing king, one of David's soldiers offered to summarily behead him, but David refused (2 Sa. 16:5-9). David conceded that perhaps even this indignity was somehow deserved, and in any case, any final justice would belong to God (2 Sa. 16:10-13).

Psalm 55 speaks of the pain of betrayal—a time of troubled thoughts and inner anguish (Ps. 55:2-5). So distressing was this circumstance that David

would have preferred to vanish into the desert and remain there until this debacle had ended (Ps. 55:6-8). The hardest part was that the instigator was not some outward enemy, but a close friend with whom David says, “I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God” (Ps. 55:12-14). As a deceiver, this betrayer had “speech smoother than butter, yet war was in his heart” (Ps. 55:20-21).

In spite of this false friend, David offered faithful advice that endures—a long obedience to God in the same direction despite the circumstances.

Cast your cares upon the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall!

He ends with a final confession to the Lord, “But as for me, I trust in you!” In one sense, this Psalm, though it is not quoted in the New Testament, has immediate conceptual connections to Judas betrayal of Jesus. Indeed, our Lord was tempted in every way as we are tempted—including painful betrayal by a close associate. In spite of it all, however, Christ’s trust in the Father remained firm, and so must ours as well. A long obedience in the same direction must include faithfulness when one is betrayed.

FAITHFULNESS OVER A LONG TIME

(Jeremiah and the Recabites)

Jeremiah lived through the disintegration of the kingdom of Judah. Growing up during the halcyon days of Josiah’s reform movement, while still a young man Jeremiah was called to compose funeral poems in honor of his beloved king, who was killed while trying to prevent the Egyptian army from joining up with the Assyrians (2 Chro. 35:20-25). The period from the death of Josiah until the exile of Judah to Babylon was a continual downward spiral, both politically and spiritually. After Josiah’s death, his son, Jehoahaz, lasted only three months before he was dethroned and exiled to Egypt (2 Ch. 36:2). Jehoiakim, his brother, was installed as a puppet king by Pharaoh Neco II, but he neither followed Yahweh nor listened to the prophets (2 Chr. 36:5; cf. Je. 36).

Like king, like people! The citizens of Judah were altogether flagrant covenant-breakers (Je. 2:4-8). They had abandoned the spring of living water—their covenant faith—for cisterns of their own digging (Je. 2:13). Like an unfaithful wife who turned to prostitution, Judah had plied her promiscuity along the high roads of the pagans (Je. 3:2). Even during the reform movement of Josiah, they had continued to indulge in the Ba'al cult, in spite of the fact that Israel, Judah's "northern sister," already had gone into exile (Je. 3:6-10). Later, Jeremiah voiced God's lament that in going up and down the streets of Jerusalem he could not find a single honest person (Je. 5:1-2). Filled with false prophets and false priests, Judah was altogether unfaithful (Je. 5:30-31).

During the reign of Jehoiakim, God's word came to Jeremiah instructing him to invite the Recabite family to one of the side rooms in the temple courtyard (Je. 35:1-2a). The Recabites were a Kenite clan (1 Chr. 2:55) who for a long time had reacted against the sedentary lifestyle of city and village life, preferring instead to maintain the semi-nomadic lifestyle of older generations (Je. 35:6-10). Presumably they worked at a common occupational trade, somewhat like a guild. Years earlier, their ancestor had joined Jehu in the northern kingdom when he wiped out the family of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kg. 10:15-17). This clan had several traditional regimens that characterized them, such as, teetotalism, living in tents only, and refusing to engage in farming. The only reason they now had come within the walls of Jerusalem was because of the siege of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army (Je. 35:11).

When Jeremiah assembled them in a temple room in order to serve them wine, his action was intended as a vivid and striking parable of faithfulness (Je. 35:2b). He knew from the outset that they would refuse. They were deeply committed to the ancient rule of their ancestor—no intoxicants, ever! Nonetheless, Jeremiah assembled them and set before them bowls and cups of wine, saying, "Drink some wine" (Je. 35:3-5)! It was no surprise, therefore, to hear them respond, "We don't drink wine!" They were true to the tradition of their ancestor (Je. 35:6).

From this refusal, God's word then came to Jeremiah, a word about faithfulness. "Go tell the men of Judah," the Lord said, "to learn a lesson!" For long years the Recabites had remained faithful to their ancestors wishes. They still remained faithful, and to that very day refused to drink intoxicants. By contrast, God had spoken to the citizens of Judah again and again, but they refused to obey. He sent prophets, and they refused to listen.

The descendants of Jonadab ben Recab have carried out the

command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me. ...I spoke to them, but they did not listen. I called to them, but they did not answer.

Jeremiah 35:16, 17b

In his final words to the Recabites, Jeremiah spoke for God that because of their faithfulness in following their ancestor's instruction, their family would continue to survive and serve the Lord (Je. 35:18-19). God rewards faithfulness! Even in what might seem to be mundane things, God values long obedience in the same direction!

FAITHFULNESS WHEN IT IS UNPOPULAR

(When the Crowds Abandoned Jesus)

Early on, the public ministry of Jesus was extremely popular. As he traveled throughout Galilee, healing all sorts of disease and illness, his reputation spread rapidly, so that large crowds followed him (Mt. 4:23-25). Thousands traveled with him from place to place (Mt. 14:13-14, 21; 15:38). News of him even reached the court of Herod, who speculated that Jesus might be John the Baptist risen from the dead (Mk. 6:14-16). When he made some of his infrequent trips to Jerusalem, people there celebrated his wonderful powers (Jn. 2:23). Here, however, there is evidence that Jesus did not evaluate this popularity in the way one might expect. *Jesus did not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man* (Jn. 2:24-25).

Both in Jerusalem and Galilee controversies escalated. Jesus offended the people in his own village of Nazareth, because he claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction and reminded them that in Elijah's and Elisha's day it was foreigners, not Israelites, whom God helped (Lk. 4:24-29). He was challenged about his disciples' carelessness concerning the oral traditions (Mk. 7:1-5). The fact that he made friends with "sinners" was regarded with disdain (Lk. 15:1-2; 7:39). That he did not hesitate to do good on the Sabbath led some to charge him with Sabbath-breaking (Mt. 12:9-14; Jn. 5:16-18; 9:14-16, 24). Some of his parables were thinly veiled charges

against the antagonism of the scribes and priests, and they knew it (Lk. 20:19)!

All this tension came to a head in Galilee after the feeding of the 5000. In spite of the miracle of the feeding, the people still demanded a miraculous sign, such as, bread from heaven (Jn. 6:30-31). Apparently, the dividing of a small boy's lunch into enough food for several thousand people was not spectacular enough. When Jesus claimed that what God really wanted from them was faith, and further, that he was himself the true bread from heaven, the Galileans, like ancient Israel, began to grumble (Jn. 6:29, 32-33, 35-36, 41-42). Finally, when Jesus used the metaphor of his body and blood to represent the true food that God gives to sustain life, they found it hard to accept (Jn. 6:53-60). In the end, many disciples turned away from Jesus, because his message did not match their expectations (Jn. 6:66).

Jesus, however, did not use popular consent as the litmus test for his validity. He knew that initial support without a long obedience in the same direction was not genuine faith (Jn. 8:31-32), and in fact, some of those who initially claimed faith ended up despising Jesus and attempted to stone him (Jn. 8:48, 57-59). Some of those who shouted, "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday (Jn. 12:12-13) may actually have joined those who shouted, "Crucify!" on Good Friday (Jn. 19:12-16).

Through all this, Jesus did not swerve from his mission. From Galilee, he resolutely set out for Jerusalem, where he knew rejection and death awaited him (Lk. 9:51). His ministry goal was to be gauged according to God's purpose, not popular expectations (Lk. 12:49-50; 22:41-42; He. 10:7). At the passion, even those closest to him abandoned him (Mt. 26:56b), fulfilling to the final degree the ancient prophecy that he would be rejected (Is. 53:3). Yet, as one made like his brothers and tempted like them in every way, he became a merciful and faithful high priest (He. 2:17-18). As the supreme example, Jesus was faithful, even when it was unpopular (He. 3:1-2, 6a).

FAITHLESSNESS WHEN WE DISAGREE

(Judas Iscariot)

Difference of opinion is unavoidable, since all humans have unique perspectives. It is possible, however, to disagree agreeably, and insofar as it

lies within us to do so, we should be irenic in our relationships (Ro. 12:18). When disagreements are sharp enough or concern issues that are big enough, it might even require distance, such as when Paul and Barnabas, after having worked together, separated and went in different directions in missions (Ac. 15:36-40). All such things are to be expected and can be handled with Christian grace without compromising faithfulness. However, sometimes an individual will allow a disagreement to become an occasion for rejection and betrayal, and this faithlessness seems to have been what happened in the life of Judas Iscariot.

Judas is possibly the most enigmatic person in Jesus' circle of disciples. From among them, Jesus chose twelve to be his special circle, and Judas was one of them (Mt. 10:2-4). It might seem strange that Jesus tolerated Judas as part of this inner circle, especially since John's Gospel says Jesus knew from the beginning who would betray him (Jn. 6:64, 70-71), but he chose him nonetheless. He even allowed him to serve as the treasurer for the group (Jn. 12:6; 13:29). Judas traveled with Jesus from the time of John's baptism to the passion, and one wonders whether or not he ever was used by God to perform a miracle (cf. Lk. 9:1-2, 6). Without question, he must have seen other apostles do such things, and of course, he was present on many occasions when Jesus demonstrated his heavenly powers. Later, Peter would say that Judas "shared in this ministry" (Ac. 1:17). He was with Jesus at the last supper, along with the others, and it was here that he carried out his final resolve to betray Jesus (Jn. 13:21-30). He had arranged for the temple guard to find and arrest Jesus at night in exchange for an agreed upon sum of money (Mt. 26:14-16, 47-49). Later he regretted his rash action and committed suicide (Mt. 27:3-5; cf. Ac. 1:18-19).

Judas' motives in this betrayal have long been pondered by Christians reading the gospel accounts. How could this man have allowed a disagreement with Jesus to devolved into a betrayal unto death? Did his enthusiasm for Jesus gradually cool? Was he sympathetic with the zealots, and when he discovered that Jesus would not call for a sword against the Romans, he decided that Jesus was a liability to the zealot cause? Was he disturbed by Jesus' indifference to the oral law of the Pharisees? Was he simply greedy? We know, for instance, that he habitually purloined money for himself (Jn. 12:4-6). Did he come to believe that Jesus was a false messiah who needed to be removed? Alternatively, did he actually believe in Jesus and sought to force him to display his power so that the authorities would be convinced? All these possibilities and more have been suggested in the attempt to unravel the riddle of Judas Iscariot.

However Judas is to be psychoanalyzed, his actions of betrayal would ever be remembered by the Christian community each time they shared in the Lord's Table (1 Co. 11:23). From disagreement, Judas descended to faithless betrayal. Here, Jesus bluntly said that it would have been better had Judas never been born (Mt. 26:24-25). Instead of a long obedience in the same direction, Judas offered minimal obedience and changed directions—with eternal consequences (Jn. 17:12)!

FAITHFULNESS IN THE FACE OF SCANDAL

(Women at the Tomb)

One can only appreciate the fact that a small group of women were last at the cross in light of the scandal of crucifixion. Crucifixion in the 1st century Roman world was a death reserved for slaves, foreigners and people of the lower classes. Roman citizens were generally exempt from crucifixion no matter what their crime. Cicero said, “For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things [i.e., the various indignities attending a crucifixion] but *the very mention of them*, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”² This speech by Cicero reflects the horrified disgust that Romans felt toward anyone who was crucified. It was considered to be the most cruel and disgusting penalty. Quintilian (ca. 35-95 AD) wrote, “Whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this fear. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect.”³

It is within this context that one must evaluate the loyalty of the Galilean women who followed Jesus to Jerusalem and remained faithful to him at the cross. One might have expected his mother to be there, and she was, but one would not have expected the Galilean women to be there—but they were there, too (Mt. 27:55-56//Mk. 15:40-41//Lk. 23:49). To be associated with a crucified victim was to share in his shame; indeed, in most cases it was to be suspicioned as a participant in his crime. If Jesus was executed as a revolutionary (Jn. 19:12-16), however unjust the sentence, then these women

² *Rab. Perd.* 16.

³ *Decl* 274.

risked a great deal by remaining sympathetic to him.

If Mark's Gospel is the earliest (the majority opinion) and if it holds the testimony of Simon Peter committed to Mark about the time of his death (AD 65) as Papias says (writing shortly after AD 100), then the composition was not much more than 30 years after Jesus' crucifixion. It is curious that in Mark's Gospel there are three anonymous figures at Jesus' arrest, the man who cut off the high priest's servant's ear, the servant himself and the young man who fled naked (Mk. 14:47, 51-52). Several decades later, the Gospel of John will tell us that the swordsman was none other than Simon Peter (Jn. 18:10), while the servant was Malchus (Jn. 18:10).

Why exists this anonymity in Mark's Gospel? Some have suggested that at the early date of Mark's composition, while many of Jesus' followers were still living, a cloak of anonymity was drawn about several of Jesus' disciples in order to protect them from repercussions. Various characters in Mark's edition of Jesus' story are unnamed, such as, the two disciples who brought the colt to Jesus (Mk. 11:1ff.), the woman who anointed Jesus' head (Mk. 14:3), the disciples who prepared the Passover meal (Mk. 14:13) and the homeowner who allowed Jesus to use his upper room for a final meal (Mk. 14:14-15). Later, we discover who some of these people were. The woman who anointed Jesus, for instance, was Mary, the sister of Martha (Jn. 12:3). By the time John's Gospel was written, probably in the 90s, no protective anonymity was necessary for Peter or Malchus or Mary, since presumably by the late 1st century, these disciples were deceased. At the early date of Mark's Gospel, however, those associated with Jesus, especially the ones who continued to live near Jerusalem, needed anonymity for their own safety.⁴ If this reconstruction is true, it is all the more remarkable that several women from Galilee stood near the cross of Jesus when he died.

These women were faithful in the face of scandal. They were faithful when their faithfulness meant significant risk. While the male disciples locked themselves in a room for fear of the authorities (Jn. 20:19), the courage and deep commitment of these women stand out in sharp relief. Yes, they were afraid, also (Mk. 16:8), but they did not allow their fear to paralyze them. They were, as Dorothy Sayers poignantly put it, "last at the cross and first at the tomb." Small wonder that the first people to whom Jesus showed himself after his resurrection on Easter were these same women! They clasped his feet and worshipped him (Mt. 28:9)!

⁴ On this whole line of reasoning, see R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 183-201.

FAITHFULNESS IN SUPPORT

(Paul and the Philippians)

Financial support for missionary work and ministry in the early church was much less organized and sophisticated than in modern church life. Still, there were some basic principles in place. From the Mosaic tradition, what today we call “the clergy” (Priests and Levites) was supported by tithes and offerings (cf. Nu. 18:21-29). This system, however, was not strictly carried over into the early churches. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he taught them to depend upon the gift support of those to whom they preached (Mt. 10:9-10). In Paul’s letters the instructions were more general—that Christians should give generously and out of love, but not out of obligation (2 Co. 8-9). *Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion* (2 Co. 9:7). Still, a basic principle from the Torah was held as normative, that is, that an ox should not be muzzled while treading grain, which implied that missionaries and ministers have the right of financial support (1 Co. 9:6-12a). Elders who direct the affairs of the church deserve to be supported for their work (1 Ti. 5:17-18).⁵

Paul took a unique approach, particularly since he was conducting missionary work among Gentiles who had limited background in Jewish tradition. His approach to money is unique, even in the New Testament. He practiced for himself an ethic which he did not demand of others, yet at the same time, which speaks very seriously to modern Christians. Because believers have liberty and the gospel is free, Paul forfeited his rights to receive money so that he might offer the gospel “free of charge” (1 Co. 9:12b, 18). He consistently refused to receive offerings in the churches while he was with them, frequently supporting himself by his tent-making trade (Ac. 18:3; 20:34; 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:7-9).

However, he graciously received offerings from congregations whom he was not with at the time (Phil. 4:15-16). This practice ensured that he did not become a financial burden to his congregations (2 Co. 12:14-16; 1 Co.

⁵ The term “honor” in the Greek text here almost certainly refers to compensation, as it does abundantly in other Greek literature. “Honor” was a Greek euphemism for payment or compensation, cf. L. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy [AB]* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 277-278.

9:15; 1 Th. 2:7). At the same time, he maintained the right of the ministry to be supported (1 Co. 9:6, 11-12; 1 Ti. 5:17-18).

While Paul was reluctant to receive offerings for himself, he encouraged monetary gifts for the sake of others. He solicited an offering for the poor from the churches in Achaia, Galatia and Macedonia (1 Co. 16:1; 2 Co. 8:1-4; Ro. 15:25-27). In doing so, however, he allowed the members of the assemblies to oversee the collection and distribution of the money (1 Co. 16:2-4; 2 Co. 8:16-19). The offering for the poor was not obligatory, but strictly voluntary. It was, as he said, a "grace of giving" (2 Co. 8:1-8; 9:5b-7). The motivation for such giving was the selfless gift of Christ (2 Co. 8:9) and the desire for equality (2 Co. 8:12). The administration of the offering was conducted in a sensitive and highly ethical manner (2 Co. 8:20-21).

In the midst of all this, Paul's gratefulness for support is all the more heart-felt, since he did not demand it. The Macedonians, especially the Philippians, seemed to be at the forefront of Christian generosity. They were among the first to contribute to the collection of funds for the poor in Jerusalem (Ro. 15:26), and they responded to Paul's needs as a missionary with financial gifts while he was in Corinth (2 Co. 11:7-9) as well as elsewhere, even when he was imprisoned (Phil. 4:14-19). This faithfulness was badly needed when Paul was a prisoner. In the Roman world, imprisonment was not necessarily regarded as a penalty for crime, but rather, prisons or house arrests were often "holding tanks" to detain those awaiting trial. Indeed, their sustenance while being so held was often at their own expense (Ac. 28:16, 30)! The Philippians' faithfulness to Paul must have been a great encouragement to him!

FAITHFULNESS WHEN ABANDONED

(Paul and the Christians in Asia)

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he was "persecuted but not abandoned" (2 Co. 4:9), he was talking about his current adversities in missionary work. At the end of his life, however, he did experience abandonment when he was on trial before Caesar Nero. Almost certainly, this was one of the most heavy disappointments in his ministry.

The closing years of Paul's life have gaps that we cannot completely

fill. While he awaited his imperial hearing in Rome, he was able to boldly preach about Jesus to everyone who came to him while he was under house arrest (Ac. 28:30-31). If the Philippian letter reflects on this period, which generally is assumed (cf. Phil. 1:7, 12-14), then Paul clearly regarded the outcome of his hearing to be a matter of life and death (Phil. 1:20; 2:17). He seems to have had hopes of acquittal (Phil. 1:19, 25; 2:24), though of course, nothing was certain (Phil. 2:23). At the end of Acts, Luke does not tell us the result of the hearing, nor is there any definite information elsewhere. The upshot of all this is that we do not have a clear picture of the closing years of Paul's life. Certainly he was incarcerated and anticipating death when he wrote 2 Timothy (1:8; 2:9; 4:6-7, 18).

In this final letter, Paul clearly speaks of his abandonment by the Christians in Asia at the time of his imprisonment. More than once, Paul had faced death squarely. At Lystra, he had been stoned and left for dead (cf. Ac. 14:19), and in the Philippian letter, he spoke of the possibility of execution (cf. Phil. 1:20). While in Asia, he wrote to the Corinthians that he had felt in his heart the "sentence of death" (2 Co. 1:8-10). At this time, however, Paul felt sure that the end was near. He compared his anticipated death with a sacrificial drink offering (4:6). Already, he felt that his life was being poured out sacrificially before the Lord (cf. Phil. 2:17). Comparing his life to an athletic contest, Paul said that his fight was now complete—his marathon was at an end (2 Ti. 4:7a).

In all his trials, he had kept the faith (2 Ti. 4:7b). To the Corinthians, he had issued the challenge to examine themselves so that they would not fail the test (cf. 2 Co. 13:5-6). Now, he could affirm that he had not failed either. The wreath of victory was in sight, which would be awarded to him on "that day," that is, the day of the epiphany of Christ and his judgment of the living and the dead (4:8; cf. 4:1). This triumphant honor would be bestowed upon all faithful Christians who had longed for Christ to return!

Early in this final letter, Paul bemoaned the fact that all the Christians in Asia had deserted him (2 Ti. 1:15a). Paul's concern for the preservation and continuity of the gospel mission was made doubly acute when those whom he had ministered to and trusted turned away from him. In the Province of Asia, which included Ephesus, Paul knew that everyone had deserted him, including two former friends, Phygelus and Hermogenes (2 Ti. 1:15b). Apparently, this abandonment was well known to Timothy, also.

What a contrast their instability was to the faithful friendship of Onesiphorus (2 Ti. 1:16). This man, who originally had become Paul's friend in Ephesus, had searched for him among the cells until he found him. Often thereafter, he visited Paul, refreshing the aging apostle's spirit and

demonstrating true Christian friendship (2 Ti. 1:17). In the end, Onesiphorus may have suffered personally for his loyalty to Paul. In his prayer for mercy Paul prays that Onesiphorus might "find mercy" on the day of final judgment (2 Ti. 1:18). Why no one stood to support Paul at this crisis is not stated, though it must have disappointed him deeply (2 Ti. 4:16). Paul does not dwell on this desertion, but it had to have been painful. Nonetheless, the Lord sustained him, and even more important, provided him the opportunity to continue his evangelistic work (2 Ti. 4:17). Though abandoned by others, Paul was not abandoned by the Lord! He persevered in this long obedience in the same direction, even though others did not, and the Lord stood by him!

THE ULTIMATE FAITHFUL WITNESS

(Christ Seated at God's Right Hand)

When John in the Revelation describes Christ Jesus as the "faithful witness," he immediately links this with Jesus' resurrected glory as the firstborn from the dead and ruler of all earthly kings (Rv. 1:5; 3:14). There is a sense, of course, in which Jesus was a faithful witness in his death (Jn. 8:37), a witness that was similarly attested by one of his followers (Rv. 2:13). Yet, there is a greater sense in which Christ stands as the living, resurrected witness for all eternity as the one exalted to the Father's right hand. As the epitome of the truth, the "Amen," he ever lives to pronounce the final "yes" to the people he has redeemed. In the face of Christ's "yes," no one can bring any charge against those whom God has chosen (Ro. 8:33-39; 1 Co. 1:8-9; 2 Co. 1:18-22).

Here, faithfulness refers to Christ's eternal testimony that triumphs over all accusations. He never fails. He never lies. He is the same for all eternity (He. 13:8). If Satan is the great accuser (and he is), then Christ is the even greater defender! This dynamic was underscored in the vision of Zechariah, when Satan stood to accuse Joshua, the high priest. As high priest, Joshua represented the whole community of Israel, for by definition, a priestly role is a representative role. Satan rose to accuse Joshua, but Yahweh said to Satan, "Yahweh rebuke you" (Zec. 3:1-4)! This unusual language, where Yahweh speaks of himself in the third person (Yahweh said, 'Yahweh rebuke you'), shows the multi-dimensional character of God, anticipating what Christian later would call the Holy Trinity. As one who was redeemed—snatched from

the fire, as it were—Joshua represented the whole community that was redeemed and snatched from the precipice of destruction through exile. Indeed, in the climax of this vision, God promised a day when he would remove the sin of the land in a single day (Zec. 3:9). Against Satan's accusations, Yahweh defended the one he had forgiven!

At a more profound level, Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, has once for all put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (He. 9:26b). He was God's faithful Son (He. 3:2, 6). Ascended into the heavens, where now he is exalted at God's right hand (Ac. 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Ro. 8:34; Ep. 1:20; Col. 3:1; He. 1:3; 1 Pe. 3:22; Rv. 3:21), he serves as the high priestly intercessor for God's people (Ro. 8:34; He. 7:25; 8:1; 10:12). When Christ ascended, he sat down—a sign that his redemptive work was perfectly complete (He. 1:3; 8:1; 10:11-12; 12:2). From this exalted position, he lives forever to defend and intercede for those he has redeemed (1 Th. 5:23-24; 2 Th. 3:3). His faithfulness is defined by his promise not to allow his children to be tempted beyond their ability to bear (1 Co. 10:13) and his willingness to forgive their sins in light of the cross (1 Jn. 1:9).

Intercession, by biblical definition, is a priestly role. In the heavenlies, Christ appears before the Father on our behalf (He. 9:24). He is the heavenly advocate with the Father (1 Jn. 2:1). In the midst of this heavenly office, he still retains a feeling for our earthly infirmities (He. 2:11, 18; 4:15), for in his earthly life, he was made like us in every way (He. 2:17). In view of this truth, believers in Jesus can hold unswervingly to their faith, for they know that the one who promised all these things is faithful and will not fail (He. 10:23). Moreover, his faithfulness should spur his disciples on to faithfulness as well (He. 10:24-25). Even if they are not faithful, he will remain faithful, for to be unfaithful would be to deny his own being (2 Ti. 2:13).