

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

16: Steadfastness

It was the evening of Sunday 3rd October 1954, after the Gospel Service, when I was baptized. I was 18 days short of turning 13 and entering my teens. This was not at all an exciting prospect since the concept of a 'Teenager' had not yet been invented - yes the world really was different then in all sorts of ways, and rationing after World War Two was still an everyday reality! My Dad performed the baptism but that evening we had a visiting speaker from a sister congregation in Liverpool. He came into the vestry afterwards where we were changing, took me by the hand and fixed me with a gimlet eye - he had a very good gimlet eye! He did not congratulate me, or welcome me into the body of Christ, or wish me God's every blessing, he merely said, 'Remember this, young man, *"No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."*' (Lk 9:62, AV). Like almost everybody in those days he quoted the Authorized Version of the Bible (KJV), since the great age of more modern translations was only just gestating, having been conceived, but had nowhere come full term. I have never forgotten that moment nor his words for they reminded me of what I had done and the necessity of remaining faithful, not just for a few heady weeks but for a lifetime of service and dedication. Steadfastness is possibly the hardest thing to do when it comes to attaining salvation.

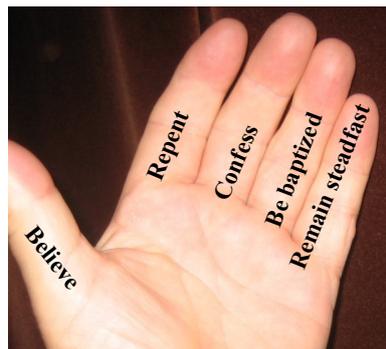
The Five Finger Exercise

No doubt we can recall the Five Finger Exercise pointing out the way of salvation, or the quick, slick answer to the question, 'What must I do to be saved?': believe, repent, confess, be baptized, and remain

steadfast. Of these five steps, the first four belong to the beginning of faith and our lives in Christ, though, apart from baptism, they essentially continue throughout for we must always believe, repent and acknowledge Christ. Baptism is a one-off event of profound spiritual significance and does not need repeating, but steadfastness means endurance for the duration, and of course, is only demonstrated and proven over time. It is rarely ever spectacular or lends itself to show in the flamboyant gestures of life we sometimes enjoy indulging in. It can often-times be tiring, tedious and discouraging yet equally it is warm, loving and comforting especially within a close, Christian family, both spiritual and earthly.

The reality

Nevertheless anybody who has been a Christian for a number of years, and a part of a reasonably well-established congregation, can look around and recall many who have 'put their hands to the plough' and have indeed looked back and given up - or all-but-given up on their faith. It is the sad fact of Christian experience that if congregations still had all the members who once named the Name of Christ and took up membership with them, AND who still lived close enough by to attend, were to do so, many meeting places would be almost full to overflowing each Lord's Day. The fall-off rate is absolutely astonishing. This is not just confined to our Western situations, for even on the active mission fields where converts seem to be almost falling over each other to be baptized, as reported joyfully by our missionaries, the drop-out rate - which is seldom reported, of course - can be equally profound. It may surprise us but it didn't sur-



Five Finger Exercise

prise the Lord. He went from being popular to feeling rejected during His ministry as we read in John's gospel: *'After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."'* (Jn 6:66-69). If they readily turned away from Him while He was here, it is no wonder that so many do so in our day.

The Parable of the Sower was told to cover this eventuality and if ever we doubt its truth, which I'm sure we don't, we must look at the steadfastness problem and recognize it for what it is. Satan tries all the tricks he knows best to deflect the convert from his or her avowed service for the Lord. We may not literally face lions in an arena today yet Peter's words are still true: *'Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.'* (1 Pe 5:8-11). Our adversary knows he is beaten and what his fate will be after the final Judgement, but he is determined to take as many with him as he can, and they will be the majority! Jesus again pointed this out early on in His ministry: *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."* (Mt 7:13-14). This is not pessimism but realism. We have to remind ourselves that the majority is not always right, especially in spiritual matters. There is no glory in being small and insignificant in worldly terms but the true church will never dominate the secular world.



Counting the cost

Before a person takes the step of becoming a Christian it is necessary for him or her to count the cost. We have already pointed out Jesus's warning about putting our hands to the plough and then looking back (Luke 9:62). Later in Luke's gospel account He is even more specific. *'Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross*

and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or

what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.'" (Lk 14:25-33). This, of course, does not mean that we have to give up on and renounce our family and friends but rather that we must be prepared to if the genuine choice is them or the Lord. My Dad made that choice, and I have known others too, but thankfully most are not forced to do so. Nevertheless it is the attitude and determination, call it the dedication, which the Lord expects. Nobody ever said that being a Christian was easy. Choices with eternal consequences have to be made no matter how difficult they are and how unpopular we may become amongst friends and relatives if we reject them for Jesus.

I have only known one man who came to believe in Jesus, through his wife, and having counted the cost actually said, "I know if I die now I am go-

ing to go to Hell, but I can't change my life-style at work. I'm one of the lads with the jokes, swearing and drinking and I'd have to change if I was baptized. I'll get baptized when I'm 65 and retired and don't have to face them all." He obviously believed he was entitled to his 'threescore years and ten' (Ps. 90:10, AV). He is the only person I've known who ever admitted to a genuine belief in the reality of Hell, and accepted that he was going there in his present condition, but the price was too high for him to pay. He obviously did not really understand just how truly dreadful Hell will be. Sadly the story does not end there. He dropped dead aged 63 two years before he retired and his poor wife, who loved him dearly, almost wanted to give up her faith because she couldn't abide the thought of spending eternity in Heaven without him. Thank God she clung on faithfully to her end but it was a very close call indeed. I conducted her funeral but I was glad another brother had taken his; it was very hard for him.



Come

Go

Steadfastness involves two important things

To accept the Lordship of the Saviour and confess that 'Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God' (cf. Acts 8:37), is not a belief to alter with fashion like the length of a lady's skirt, or whether to parade around sporting designer stubble, as men who simply can't be bothered to shave regularly call it! ('Designer scruff', I call it thereby proving to be a child of my generation in the process - full beards are not in question here!) Such a belief has implications which stretch into eternity as well as for this life. As far as the latter is concerned it means commitment to Christ and His church. This involves two things: worship and witnessing. Jesus said, "Come to me..." (Mt 11:28). He also said to His faithful eleven apostles, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation," (Mk 16:15), and although specific to them at the time He said it, that charge has been passed on to all Christians down two millennia. 'Coming' and 'Going' are essential parts of Christian commitment and steadfastness. There are dire warnings against those who having once committed to Christ afterwards

reject Him - but that is for our next study, Number 17, 'Apostasy'.

Sanctification

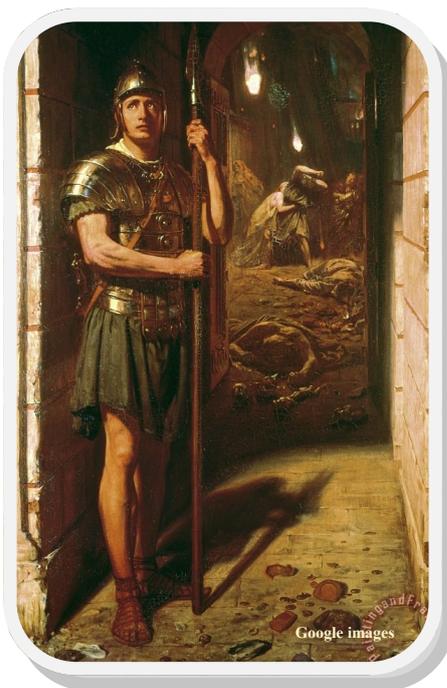
When new Christians emerge from the waters of baptism they are spiritual babes. They will not be perfect then, nor will they ever be in this life. They will, however, be forgiven and will now have the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to guide and help them on their Christian walk. This is what Peter promised the repentant, believing Jews at the time of the very first Gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost when, with absolute horror, they realised that they had been responsible for encouraging the death of the Messiah they had all been waiting for for at least 1500 years. "Brothers," they exclaimed, "what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," (Acts 2:37-38) - and if this story is not engraved on every Christians heart and mind, together with the location of the verses, somebody has not been paying attention to what they were being taught about salvation and the penitent's response to the 'Good News'! In time this will be producing the fruit of the Spirit in their lives in increasing measure. Paul lists this fruit in Galatians 5:22-23 as: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.' The love spoken of here is 'patient and kind; ... does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.' [and] ... never ends.' (1 Cor 13:4-8).

This is the ideal yet Paul, who was an exemplary Christian, knew he fell far short of it. Writing to the Romans he laments for his own shortcomings. 'I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that

is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.' (Ro 7:14-25). If he struggled like this, it's odds on we will also find it difficult at times and will let the side down, as it were. He knew he fell quite short of the righteousness which comes from God though faith in Christ (Php 3:8-11). His solution tells us what he did, and therefore what we should look to be doing too. 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' (Php 3:12-14). In the words of the hymn, he pressed on the upward way. This process is called 'sanctification' and biblically those engaged in the process are called 'saints'. Every Christian is a saint, not just a special élite who have been carefully screened for holiness, real or imagined, before being admitted, after death of course, to an exalted circle of spiritual intermediaries.

The spiritual babe will not instantly become perfect, sloughing off all his or her old ways and habits, though, if present, some major ones by any standards will have to be dealt with quickly. Paul mentioned such a list when writing to Corinth. 'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you.' (1 Co 6:9-11). They were a motley crew in the church at Corinth! Some babes will



Faithful unto death

Famous painting by Edward John Poynter in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. It was inspired by the skeletons of Roman guards who remained faithfully at their posts during the last days of Pompeii in 79 AD. We are 'soldiers' for Christ.

succeed in maturing very quickly and could well soon outdistance some Christians of many years' standing - there is no necessary exalted position in the 'worthiness stakes' within a congregation based solely on the accumulation of years since being baptized. Spiritual maturity should be linked to length of service but sadly this is not always the case. Some are early maturers while others progress slowly and may never ever attain great spiritual heights. Both are precious to God. However, we can never stand still in Christianity. We either move forward or backward. God is pleased with the forward movers but not with backsliders.

The Christian filter

Becoming a Christian means that we choose to view the world through a 'Christ filter' and then begin to filter out what should not be in our lives. Every Christian finds this hard at times and slips on occasions. They do not then have to be re-baptized to receive forgiveness. They repent, i.e. confess their guilt to God, ask for forgiveness through Jesus and resolve to do better. John handles this in his first Letter: 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.'

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ

the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.' (1 Jn 1:8-2:2). We now have access directly to God, though our mediator, Jesus, and none other, not through saints, or holy men and women, not even through Mary - Jesus's mother - or angels, but solely through Jesus. *'There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.'* (1 Tim 2:5-6). It was Jesus who shed His blood to pay the price of sin, not Mary, or Paul, or Peter, or Mother Theresa! Hence only He can mediate on our behalf. Never be misled on this point, and when the Corinthians were lining themselves up behind certain men, Paul pressed home this very point. *'It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?... What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.* (1 Co 1:11-13, 1 Co 3:5-6).

Not good enough?

Many people have the mistaken idea that they have to give up this, that, or the other before they can become a Christian. The list of 'forbidden fruit' can be as long and subjective as the individual compiling it can devise. Obviously we are not talking here about things which are clearly violating the Laws of God, some of which we mentioned above. These sorts of things do have to be dealt with quickly, of course. However, if it is one of those areas of opinion which the Bible allows us all to exercise and therefore gives no direct, clear lead on which all Christians can concur, it can never be that the potential Christian must develop a mature Christian attitude towards them before being baptized. 'Mature Christian attitudes' are cultivated not imposed and on some issues even 'mature Christians' are not unani-

mous. You develop mature Christian attitudes not because somebody 'forces' you to agree with them - though sadly there are plenty who try to do so - but because once you accept Christ you view the world differently, and you now have the power and Spirit of God to help you make a judgement.

Remember, all the members of a congregation will be at different points along the road to sanctification - that unobtainable goal in this life of being totally Christ-like for which we all strive. This means that there will be many imperfections and blemishes within that group. We will never find a perfect congregation because Christians are not perfect people. They are sinners, whom Jesus has received. They have recognized their imperfections and are striving, like every other Christian, to do something about it with God's help and by His grace. It's a hoary old chestnut to say that if you ever find a perfect congregation, don't join it because you will ruin its perfection!

Worship

Christians must worship, and we cannot worship alone; it is a corporate activity. Though not in the specific context of worship, Jesus made the following promise, *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,"* (Mt 18:20), and Christians most readily and normally meet in His Name to worship, and believe He is amongst them when they do. Indeed, great or small, all are instructed not to neglect meeting together: *'let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another'* (Heb 10:24-25), we learn in Hebrews - and this admonition tells us that they had these sorts of problems even in those heady days of the new beginnings! Nothing much changes; Solomon would not have been surprised (Eccles. 1:9-10).

Jesus told us to meet and remember Him in the partaking of bread and the cup in a symbolic re-



Some Opinions which have divided

Can a Christian own slaves? Can Jewish converts eat bacon?
Can Christians bear arms? Can Christians drink alcohol?

enactment the Lord's Supper. *'The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."'* (1 Co 11:23-25). There is no specific and necessary command to locate this act of remembrance on a Sunday, the first day of the week (not the last, as many calendars and diaries would have us believe today!) (Acts 20:7), yet we know that this is when the early Christians met for this purpose - and they usually called it 'The Lord's Day' not Sunday. These gatherings were to proclaim the Lord's death, burial and resurrection until He returns and were for mutual encouragement, edification and spiritual strengthening of faith. Involved in these gatherings were singing, prayers, scripture readings, preaching and teaching, the Lord's Supper, of course, and giving financially to meet perceived needs. Jesus knew only too well that we will only gain strength and grow by mutual fellowship and sharing. We belong to a family and if we neglect the family the ties that bind become weak and break. Paul knew exactly how important it was to gather with brethren for his sake as well as theirs. He wrote to the Roman church, *'I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.'* (Ro 1:11-12). Worship never works in just



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one direction; it builds us all up - or it should!

Many non-Christians are put off religion by the organised churches. They criticize them and resent their intrusion in their lives at times. This is understandable and has to be admitted. There are several monolithic institutions which purport to represent religion but whose structure is totally alien to that of the New Testament. (We will study the Church in Number 19.) In the New Testament there is no organised church beyond the level of autonomous congregations, under the sole authority of the Lord and the Scriptures, led locally by elders at best and answerable to no earthly leader beyond their own individual communion. Thus there are no citywide authorities, no district authorities, county authorities, and national or international authorities. At first sight this might appear to be a formula for spiritual and religious anarchy, yet being firmly under the guidance and control of the Scriptures with a powerful belief that leaders are answerable to the Lord for their attitudes and actions, it is a formula to prevent religious dictatorship with all the attendant ills of organised religions.

Witnessing

Amongst the last recorded words uttered by Jesus before He departed this Earth were, *"Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation..."* (Mk 16:15, cf. Mt 28:16-20). The Christian is to spread the 'Good News' throughout the world. They were not told to make all nations into disciples but rather to make disciples of, or from, all nations. We have already seen that Jesus knew that those who would accept the Gospel would be relatively few compared to those who would reject it.

Preaching does not necessarily involve public proclamation from a pulpit, which, of course, can often be restricted to the gifts of just a few so blessed to be able to do so. Understandably this is a significant part of it, but what it really means is that each member seeks out ways in which they can spread the good news as individuals. It also means that each congregation seeks out ways in which it too, as a group of Christians, can spread the good news. These are ways usually denied to individuals



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**The Vatican.
Monolithic religion at its height**

since a group effort, or group finance, is required.

There are many ways in which this can be done, and a complete list is impossible to draw up here or almost anywhere. Initially talking to friends and relatives is the obvious way, and this involves acknowledging Jesus - call that 'confessing Christ'. Having 'nailed your flag to the mast' so to speak,

living the life as befits a child of God is the next step. Critics will be watching and the worst witness we can make is the badly-lived Christian life. Our critics won't concede an inch of leniency in their judgement on us! They want to label us as hypocrites, despite the fact that there is probably greater unrecognized and unacknowledged hypocrisy in their lives. Neither God nor men will judge our lives by comparing them with the lives of our contemporaries. Their failings are not our yardstick.

When growing up we did not have a car - very few did in those days. So travelling to worship services was by public transport and usually the same buses and trams were caught at the same times each Sunday. People got to see you following your routine and many Christians would deliberately carry a Bible as a silent act of witness to their faith. We did. That's a sort of preaching. One of the best witnessing along those lines I ever saw were two old ladies in our congregation. They journeyed across the city by bus and tram to reach us and had about a half-mile walk down a long, straight street from the tram stop to the building. The word 'walk' is a euphemism for 'totter'. The people of the district used to see them doing this twice every Sunday, for morning and evening worship, knew where they were going and why. They both died in their 80s. Neither said anything or carried a banner or placard; they didn't have to. Their faithfulness was their sermon, and their example to a very young boy growing up and noting it has helped his faithfulness along life's pathway. That is how these things work. Quiet faithfulness preaches just as 'loudly' as the 'Hallelujah Hell-thunder' pulpit blast, and is probably much more effective. Cars may be convenient



Well done good and faithful servant

but they have stifled some opportunities for witnessing!

Once the basics are in place and the foundations are well laid via study and faithfulness each Christian must assess his or her talents and seek to use them to the full. Nobody has all of the talents necessary and everybody cannot necessarily do all the specific things that anybody

can do, apart from encouraging and supporting. All are not preachers. The Bible specifically forbids sisters to engage in this during worship services (1 Cor. 14:33-35, 1 Tim 2:8-15). All are not teachers, or pastoral workers, or good with young people, or.... We are not all eye, ear or mouth (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31) but we can all do something. Look at what Paul wrote to the church in Rome about this. *'For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.'* (Ro 12:3-8). If we are not steadfast and faithful the congregation is missing our talents and is that much weaker by our absence. It is faithfulness which will be commended by the Master when we face Him after death. *"Well done good and faithful servant,"* He will say as He welcomes home those who steadfastly worked for Him (Mt 25: 20 and 23).

Conclusion

The point of emphasis here is that once we take on-board a belief in the lordship of Jesus as the Christ it leads not only to an initial response in repentance, public acknowledgement of that belief (confession)

and baptism, but also to a lifetime's dedication to the cause of Christ. It is illogical to say, 'I believe that Jesus rose from the dead,' and for that belief to make no difference at all to our lives. Our conduct and the way we view the world must be consistent with such a belief or we do not truly believe it. Some beliefs are passive, like the height of Mount Everest or the depth of Loch Ness, yet others are active and cannot wash over us as being of no significance at all. Paul gave Timothy a description of what belief in Jesus as Lord meant to him at the end of his life as he faced execution: *'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'*



The Crown of Righteousness

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.' (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Fighting the good fight and keeping the faith is the underpinning motive driving the Christian onwards and upwards in faithfulness and steadfastness. It may not always be easy but the promised reward is the accolade of 'Well done, good and faithful servant' followed by 'the crown of righteousness' for all eternity.

Tasks

Analyse the reasons why people are falling away today and fail to stay the course. What would you suggest as a remedy?