

No compromise

It doesn't seem to matter how hard we try. Whatever we do, however good our intentions are, there is always someone ready to oppose us, just waiting for the right moment to pull down what we are working so hard to build up.

Jesus experienced this. He came only to do God's will, and he lived, died and rose again perfectly fulfilling that will. Not once did he display the slightest hint of compromise. But his single-mindedness and dedication were continually opposed – and deliberately misrepresented – by the religious leaders of the time.

When we find ourselves consumed with a similar zeal we can expect similar reactions. Rumour flies, slander spreads, gossip creeps, accusations are thrown – and it all seems to be targeted at us.

When it's from only one or two people it's not so hard to cope with, but when we get a whole group or a whole congregation against us, all trying to squeeze us into their mould, it can be very hard to stand.

But never mind; we're not alone. In fact we're in elevated company! For not only Jesus, but every man and woman down

through history who carried a true revelation and word from God, was strongly opposed – even within the body of genuine believers.

Elijah was called the ‘troubler of Israel’ (1 Kings 18:17). The prophet Jeremiah was threatened with death if he persisted with his prophetic burden. The apostle Paul was accused of teaching things that were unlawful. And the early Christians were angrily opposed as those who had turned the world upside down.

In more recent history, Martin Luther, in the face of assembled ecclesiastical antagonism, made his simple confession: ‘Here I stand. I can do no other.’

So it should come as no surprise to us when we face insult, accusation and even ostracism because of our beliefs.

That was what happened to Chris and Tanya whom we met earlier. After initial anger from their minister, they eventually left the church on good terms, only to find some time later, to their horror, that the rest of the congregation had been told to keep away from them.

‘It was horrible,’ they recalled. ‘People went from being brothers and sisters to being outright enemies. If they saw us in the street they would cross the road rather than speak. A few came to see us, but there were many lies and rumours spread about us. We felt really hurt and empty.’

A heartbreaking time for Chris and Tanya – and unavoidable if they were to press on with God. But it wasn’t without its compensations. For by their obedience not only were they themselves released to move into all that God had prepared for them, but two of their worst critics, Geoff and Mavis, also had their lives turned upside down! And having met with God in a radical way this couple are now part of Chris and Tanya’s church and two of their closest friends.

God never leaves us empty. What the devil takes away, God restores. Out of heartbreak he brings blessing. Here we have four people no longer frustrated and empty but moving on in the forefront of God’s purposes, committed to him and to each other.

Taking 'the sovereign stance'

How do we handle criticism and opposition when it occurs? How do we cope with the well-meant but misguided advice, the scaremongering and the persuasive pressure?

The Bible indicates a particular attitude that we must take in such circumstances, an attitude we see displayed in the life of King David.

Psalm 38 portrays him under intense pressure, both mental and spiritual. His friends and family have separated from him. His enemies are many and powerful. In it all he feels he is being opposed merely for following what is good. But he endures it by adopting what I call 'the sovereign stance'.

In the face of wrong advice, criticism, argument and even plot and threat against him, this is how he kept his feet on the right path: 'I, like a deaf man, do not hear; and I am like a dumb man who does not open his mouth. Yes, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no arguments. For I hope in thee, O Lord' (Psalm 38:13-15 NASB).

Closing his ears to every sound but the voice of God and closing his mouth to avoid fruitless argument, he placed his situation totally in the hands of the Lord.

As far as we can, we should do the same. We may not find it easy to shut out the many voices in the world, or find perfect quiet away from the verbal strife. But we can determine not to contribute to them.

True, we should be prepared to give a reason for our actions and answer legitimate questions. And we should be ready to share with any person genuinely concerned about us. But we are not required to field every accusation that flies at us. And we don't have to be drawn into long, pointless and often hostile discussions with people more interested in having an argument than seeking the truth.

We may not be able to stop everything from coming in, but we can certainly control what goes out!

We see this attitude very clearly in Jesus, who displayed 'the sovereign stance' in the face of violently hostile accusations: 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth' (Isaiah 53:7). When falsely accused before the high priest he 'remained silent' (Matthew 26:63).

When Pilate himself questioned him, still 'Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge' (Matthew 27:12-14). And even when King Herod got in on the act, eager for a prolonged interrogation, he 'gave him no answer' (Luke 23:9).

As someone once said, 'Never try to defend yourself - your real friends don't need it, and your enemies will never believe it!'

'No need to go overboard'

Nevertheless, in the face of so much opposition, there comes creeping into our room at night, or sometimes even in the bold light of day, the seductive temptation to *compromise*.

Seeing that we cannot be fully persuaded from our chosen course of action, some will try to weaken our determination just enough to make us accommodate their position in some form or another. Just as some members of Kenneth's church (we met him in chapter five) tried to persuade him to stay but not be so dogmatic about obedience to the Scriptures.

That was just the kind of subtle dealing Pharaoh attempted with Moses. God's desire has always been for a people liberated from slavery into a dimension of uninhibited worship of him. So, sending Moses to Pharaoh, the enslaver of his people, God's command was clear: 'Let my people go' (Exodus 8:1).

But Pharaoh hardened his heart towards the Lord and refused to allow the Israelites to leave the country. So the Lord sent a plague of water-to-blood, followed by plagues of frogs, gnats and flies, until Pharaoh, alerted by now to the power of the Lord, became eager for a settlement.

'Go, sacrifice to your God *here in the land*' (Exodus 8:25), he offered, thinking he could lure God into a compromise. But it was a totally unacceptable proposal.

Pharaoh had to learn, as must we all, that the will of God is not open to arbitration. You can accept it or you can reject it – but you can't change it!

The potentate of Egypt, however, hadn't learned that yet. Still thinking he could enter into political negotiation, just as he would with the petty monarchs of this world, Pharaoh put his next offer on the table: 'I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the desert, *but you must not go very far*' (Exodus 8:28).

We cannot bargain with God this way. God wanted his people totally out of Egypt. And just to show who's boss, when the Israelites finally left, with Pharaoh's full consent, they didn't leave as paupers. They took with them great quantities of the gold and silver of Egypt, given to them freely by the people of the land!

Going to the other extreme

King Jeroboam, who led the rebellion of Israel against Judah after Solomon's death, used a similar ploy to secure his questionable rule over the newly-formed northern kingdom.

Under King David the centre for the worship of God had been established in Jerusalem, which was now in the southern kingdom of Judah, and Jeroboam realised the people would soon begin to question their allegiance to the north if they continued to make pilgrimage there. So, on the advice of his counsellors, he made two golden calves and, repeating the great sin of Israel in the wilderness, presented them as the gods that brought the people up from Egypt.

Setting up one in Bethel and the other in Dan, he put forward a compromised religion, saying, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem' (1 Kings 12:28).

Bethel (meaning 'House of God') had been the historic centre of worship before it was abandoned by God's choice of Jerusalem. So, cashing in on the strong emotional pulls of nostalgia, and seeking to rekindle allegiances of the past,

Jeroboam made a clever move.

Dan, however, was the most northerly town of the northern kingdom. It had no special religious significance and was about as far from Jerusalem as you could get! The chronicler records, 'This thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the [golden calf] there' (1 Kings 12:30).

It seems that when it has become too much to go God's way we open ourselves up, by way of compromise, to going right to the other extreme. If we give the devil an inch, he'll take a mile. And he'll keep on taking until suddenly we find ourselves miles from the original track.

Succumbing to compromise, we convince ourselves we have acted wisely. And we find some satisfaction in believing that, in view of the opposition, we have even performed the role of peacemaker. But in reality we have been lured into a fragile and deceptive armistice.

Are you prepared to obey *all* that the Lord has shown you?