

## Galatians 5 v 22 The fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness

### Introduction

On 17 December 1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright flew their home-made plane in the air for fifty-nine seconds. Later that day they sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio. It stated: 'First sustained flight today fifty-nine seconds. Hope to be home by Christmas.' The sister was delighted with the news she had received and went to the offices of her local newspaper. It was a quiet news week so the editor expressed delight at receiving this item for possible publication. In fact, it was the lead story on the front page of the paper. The headline read: 'Popular Local Bicycle Merchants To Be Home For Holidays' [story found in many on-line sources]. Looking back to the previous century it is hard to grasp how the editor missed the whole point of the telegram. It might have been his biggest story in years. He had missed the first successful plane flight. In so many contexts people can miss the point that ought to be grasped. In looking at a list of Christian character qualities faithfulness sounds quite ordinary and not very exciting. In the same way when a person is describing the potential boyfriend or girlfriend they might like to have –how many would include faithfulness amongst the handful of most important qualities they would view as essential? Yet looking back over years of friendships, marriages or people with whom you may have worked for years, the quality of faithfulness is one that rightly looms large as a most desirable quality to commend and to honour.

### 1. The Meaning of 'Pistis' (faith / faithfulness)

There are three meanings of this word in the letters written by Paul in the New Testament. The context usually makes plain how it is to be understood in any particular passage.

(a) **Faith is trust** In the New Testament this word πιστις (faith or faithfulness) is most commonly understood as referring to an act or attitude of believing in someone or something; we think most of all of putting our faith in the Lord Jesus for salvation –it is a faith step. For example, Ephesians 2:8: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.* Or Romans 5:1-2a: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.* It has the idea of self-surrender, of absolute confidence in or complete obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our relationship with God is on the basis of His grace alone, but we receive it by faith; accepting His free gift of salvation like a little child accepting a Christmas present from a much loved relative or family member. In life we are right to be extremely careful about free gifts offered to us in phone calls from strangers; going back some years there was a scam about free holidays overseas and various groups of people were making such 'offers'. Allegedly I won three such trips in quick succession one year, but because I was unwilling to give total strangers personal details about various things the things I had allegedly won never materialised! By contrast 'In God we trust' as the message on many an American dollar proclaims is the most important step any one of us can take. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? I hope you will do so if you have not taken this step. As a child of God who has taken this step you can know with certainty that you are placed in a right relationship with God and adopted into His family because of what Jesus has done for us as undeserving sinners.

(b) **Faith as a spiritual gift for service** In the list of special spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12:7, 9a, 11: *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...to another faith by the same Spirit...All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He distributes them to each one, just as He determines.* This is a special blessing from God that is given only to some believers for particular ministries or forms of service. I cannot say more than this because it is simply stated as a fact by the apostle without any further explanation. However,

there are hints in the Bible concerning the extraordinary nature of this spiritual endowment. In I Corinthians 13:2 Paul wrote: *...if I have a faith that can move mountains...* Jesus likewise in Mark 11:22-23 stated: <sup>22</sup> ***'Have faith in God,'*** Jesus answered. <sup>23</sup> *'Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.* I cannot see the practical benefits of a literal mountain removal, but there is something extraordinary being pointed to by Jesus as it comes up more than once in the Gospel accounts. In Matthew 17:20-21 Jesus rebuked His disciples for their lack of faith implying that if they exercised something He had given to them that the problem that defeated them could have been overcome: *He replied, 'Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'* Illustrations of the kind of faith involved here include Elijah's extraordinary prophecies about the withholding of rain before King Ahab in the battle with the prophets of Baal (I Kings 17-18). Or the prophetic word of Jahaziel son of Zechariah in the time of Jehoshaphat King of Judah in II Chronicles 20 where on the front line of an impending battle in which the nation's future was on the line he urged them to show up and watch God do all the work. II Chronicles 20:21-22 records what the king and his army did: *After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise Him for the splendour of His holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for His love endures for ever.'* <sup>22</sup> *As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.*

(c) **Faith as faithfulness** However, the word is not only a theological term; it is also used as an ethical virtue. A person modelling this character quality might be described as 'faithful', 'trustworthy' or 'loyal'. In Romans 3:3 the apostle contrasts the fickleness of unbelieving Jews with the God they profess to follow: *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?* <sup>4</sup> *Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar.* No matter how unfaithful human beings may be it will never change or nullify the faithfulness of God. Here in Galatians 5 there is no doubt that Paul is listing a series of ethical virtues or character qualities that should be witnessed in the life of a person who is seeking to live in step with God through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is at work in your life and mine it will become increasingly transformative as we become more like our Lord and Saviour in the way we behave. The one who has faith in a faithful God in turn is recognised as a faithful person.

## 2. **The biblical modelling of faithfulness**

(a) **A foundational quality of a follower of Jesus** In I Corinthians 4:1-2 Paul wrote: *This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.* <sup>2</sup> *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust **must prove faithful.*** On several occasions Jesus told stories to illustrate this character quality. In Matthew 24:45 Jesus described His committed followers who continued in dedicated service until His return in this way, using the language of household servants who honour their absentee master: ***'Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?'*** <sup>46</sup> *It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.* (Matthew 24:45-46). In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus speaks in this way of the servants who did exactly as their master had instructed them. He portrays the returning master expressing his gratitude in these terms: <sup>21</sup> *'His master replied, "Well done, **good and faithful servant!** You have been **faithful** with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"* (Matthew 25: 21, 23) An earthly employer will be delighted to have workers who can be trusted to get on with their

work in his or her absence. The Lord expects the same of each one of us because we represent Him in the places where we find ourselves during the week. Do you and I faithfully seek in our attitudes, speech and actions to reflect the One who has been so faithful to us in His relationship with us?

(b) **A recognised quality of effective servants of Jesus** In autobiographical words the apostle Paul wrote this statement to his younger friend Timothy. In I Timothy 1:12, 14 it states: *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me **trustworthy**, appointing me to His service...<sup>14</sup> The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with **the faith** and love that are in Christ Jesus.* It was a non-negotiable standard for his calling to Christian ministry that he was considered ‘trustworthy’ or ‘faithful’. This is not something we learn from reading a beautifully polished C.V., instead it must have been modelled in daily life and observed by other people. When a local church is looking to appoint Christian men and women to a variety of leadership positions in the work of that congregation one key factor will be whether it is believed that person can be trusted to carry out the particular duties of that position. In II Timothy 2:2 this young pastor in Ephesus was charged with finding individuals who were capable of instructing others in their shared Christian convictions. *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses **entrust to reliable people** who will also be qualified to teach others.* Time and again the apostle prized this quality which he saw so clearly in some of his missionary colleagues. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 he wrote this concerning Timothy: *For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is **faithful in the Lord**. He will remind you of **my way of life in Christ Jesus**, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.* Concerning Tychichus he wrote in Ephesians 6:17: *Tychicus, the dear brother and **faithful servant** in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing.* Or concerning Epaphras in Colossians 1:7: *... Epaphras, our dear fellow-servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf.* 3 John is a very short letter of the apostle John to his friend Gaius whom he commends for his faithfulness in Christian service. 3 John verse 3-4 states: *It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about **your faithfulness** to the truth and how **you continue to walk in the truth**. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.* There are plenty more examples in the New Testament, but most importantly could you and I be described in this way concerning the responsibilities entrusted to us in the life of this congregation? It is not a question of whether we have or small duties entrusted to our care – the issue here can we be trusted to exercise our calling faithfully week by week, month by month, year by year? I hope we can be trusted to live in this way.

(c) **A costly commitment to following Jesus** In many parts of the world Christians are facing much more serious pressures on their faith than we have experienced in centuries in this country. In a minority of countries today it can cost you your life if you are found to be a follower of Jesus. In Revelation 2:10 Jesus gave this challenge to the Turkish Christians living in Smyrna (now Izmir). ***Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*** This was not a theoretical possibility, but what had happened down the road at Pergamum, as Jesus’ words to that church, written at the same time as the Smyrna letter explain; Revelation 2:13 states: *I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in Me, not even in the days of **Antipas, my faithful witness**, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.* The price of faithfulness to Jesus can be death. Recently I saw sights I will not forget of Christian men, women and little children hanged or literally crucified by Syrian Islamist rebels in Aleppo province. They were ordered to become Muslims or pay with their lives. There are no words to describe some of the horrors visible in those pictures and we can ask searching questions why our secular BBC does not report this aspect of what is happening in that country. The sobering challenge

comes home to you and me- how faithful would we be to our Lord and Saviour if persecution similar to its manifestations in parts of the Middle East or other countries significantly affected by Islamist extremists was present in our land? I hope and pray we would be found faithful.

(d) **Our model of faithfulness** The Lord Jesus on earth modelled for us how we ought to attempt to live out this quality of life. Revelation 1:5 describes Him as *the faithful witness*. In Revelation 19:11, a dramatic scene picturing His second coming portrayed Him as one who is called *Faithful and True*. The same character quality comes up time and again in the New Testament. Hebrews 2:17-18 illustrates His modelling of this and other qualities and suggests that it can inspire and encourage us to maintain our dedicated service for the Lord when times are hard. It states: *For this reason He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people.*<sup>18</sup> *Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.* Hebrews 3:1-2 continues in the same line of thinking concerning Jesus: *Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.*<sup>2</sup> **He was faithful to the One who appointed Him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house.** Other people at times let us down or fail to live up to their own standards, but He is faithful and gracious to us. Jesus made visible on earth a character quality that God has always modelled in eternity. Paul in I Corinthians 1:9 wrote: **God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.** He will also stand with us to the end of our faith journey on earth as Paul explained in I Thessalonians 5:23-24: *May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>24</sup> **The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.** How will this happen in practise? I Corinthians 10:13 explains it: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* What a wonderful and encouraging verse of Scripture – one worth memorising! In II Timothy 2:11-13 are some words that appear to have been used in Christian worship services and which Paul quotes to make a point: <sup>11</sup> *Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him;* <sup>12</sup> *if we endure, we will also reign with Him. If we disown Him, He will also disown us;* <sup>13</sup> ***if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot disown himself.*** Praise God for His amazing faithfulness to us! Are you faithful to Him week by week, month by month, year after year? I trust so!

### 3. **The practical outworking of faithfulness**

(a) **Faithfulness in our relationship with God** Jesus modelled for us a way of life that demonstrated from an early age what it meant to be a faithful follower of God. In Luke 2:41-52 we have the one window of opportunity to see something of the kind of young adult that Jesus was when He was seen spending additional time in the Jerusalem Temple with the teachers of the Law *listening to them and asking them questions* (Luke 2:46b). Mary and Joseph and others from their village had already set off back home as the Passover Festival had been concluded. They returned to Jerusalem to look for Jesus and when they eventually found Him expressed their concern about Him. In Luke 2:49 we have part of the response He gave to them. *Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?* Or it could be translated *'Didn't you know I had to be focussed on my Father's business?'* On a busy day in Samaria recorded in John 4 the disciples were amazed at Jesus' priorities when He had obviously missed eating some lunch. In His response to them that day He included these words: *'My food', said Jesus, 'is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work'* (John 4:34). Jesus knew that His life's

calling was to go to the cross to die in our place, yet despite that overshadowing His entire time of ministry He embraced His calling with faithfulness and resolution. In Luke 9:51 it states: *As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* His commitment in prayer in Gethsemane that God's will be done (Luke 22:42) the night before His crucifixion is awe-inspiring and deeply humbling that He went through this for you and me. No wonder in the book of Revelation the resurrected Jesus is described as *the faithful witness...* (Revelation 1:5) and the One who is called *Faithful and True* (Revelation 19:11); there are many things which we cannot control in life or cannot do, but there is no excuse for not being faithful in our daily walk with the Lord. Each follower of Jesus can be faithful in daily Bible reading and prayer; in attendance at God's house for Sunday worship as we sing His prayers, hear His Word proclaimed and meet around His Table to receive the signs of His faithfulness to us in bread and wine. Faithfulness in regular financial giving is a core part of our Christian stewardship. In a context where people were probably paid weekly Paul gave this advice to the Church at Corinth in I Corinthians 16:2: *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up... [for the Lord's work].* He later write these words to them in II Corinthians 9:6-7: *Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. <sup>7</sup> Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* We make pledges when we are baptised or come into membership in a local congregation about our dedication to serving the Lord. Are you and I faithfully honouring those pledges? In a society where numerous pressures are upon us to do all manner of things on the Lord's Day Hebrews 10:23-25 gives us this challenge: *Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Faithfulness includes a requirement for personal self-discipline to ensure that the most important things are not crowded out of our lives and replaced by the urgent and the temporal. Baptists and other Evangelical Christians can be so tempted to be like Martha putting the doing of things ahead of being with Jesus and valuing most of all our time with Him. Are you faithful in your walk with the Lord at the present time? Or are there things which need some attention?

(b) **Faithfulness in our daily work and witness** How are we to go about our daily work or vocation? A misguided school-leaver might think –oh no! I've got to get a job for the next fifty years to pay the bills. That may be very true, but a better perspective can be found in Paul's advice to the Church in Colossae. Colossians 3:17: *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him;* Colossians 3:23: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.* We seek to do our work –if we are fortunate to have employment- to the best of our ability; I have seen recently the difference in hospital wards when patients are treated by people committed to a vocation rather than just doing a job. It is a deep concern the difference in levels of care provided. Many of us will have experienced people employed to do various jobs and seen how some take delight in providing quality work and others a standard that falls considerably short of what might reasonably be expected. I remember years ago a friend who returned from working in a city in Sweden and was struck by something he said. A particular large employer there made a point of seeking to employ committed Christians as staff members. He himself had no religious convictions but had observed that on average Christians worked harder were more reliable and could be trusted to handle the company's finances. The faithfulness of his Christian employees was a great testimony to their Lord and Saviour. How we speak to and about other colleagues in the

canteen or staffroom should be informed by a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. There are attitudes or conversations others might engage in that we will avoid because of our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. A number of surveys over recent years have shown that Christians have made a large contribution to voluntary service in their communities. This is no surprise because it is God's world and as stewards of the resources entrusted to us we have a calling to make a contribution to making it a better place in a wide variety of different ways. Our witness in the workplace at its core begins with being a good employer or employee, treating other people with respect and integrity, fairness and generosity. A Christian employer who has Bible texts over the walls but pays the lowest wages they can get away with and has poor working conditions for their workers will be communicating something loud and clear about their faith- and not something honouring to the Lord! Likewise a Christian employee who misuses company time or property or who models poor interpersonal skills amongst their colleagues is unlikely to have an influence for good or the gospel. The mission-field for the majority of church members is the workplace – may we never forget our calling to serve the Lord there!

(c) **Faithfulness in marriage, family life and friendships** Faithfulness and loyalty in friendships and families and especially marriages today are greatly undervalued. It is not only major corporations in the age of globalisation that don't value long-term faithfulness by employees to the company; too often faithfulness in relationships is sacrificed for the excitement of something temporary; a couple who have given their best to loving one another faithfully for a lifetime have accomplished significantly more than many a work award or sporting or artistic accolade! The things that matter most too often we fail to invest in them adequately. A spouse or a friend or a neighbour does not require an eloquent speech about undying love, friendship or whatever topic comes to mind; but they may need tasks performed about the home, bins put out; shopping purchased, a lift to a hospital appointment or a few minutes to listen while they share some concerns. Or some other ordinary demonstration of practical interest in their wellbeing; It is a tragedy that our society so undervalues the dedicated practical faithful care of so many people to others- but God takes note of it. May God help us to model this flavour of Christ-like living in our daily lives, for Jesus' sake, Amen.