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Hebrews 12:14 states:

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” NIV

Apparently, Saul placed a higher value on being at peace with his people than he did on being holy (or set apart or peculiar) in order to obey God’s commands. God demands that we place Him first — *even* if it places us in uncomfortable positions with our peers. Saul failed to be peculiar when he *should* have been because it put him at risk with his people and he feared their response. He was indeed, more concerned about what the people would think than he was about what God would think.

Christians who wish to obey God may be given opportunities to be peculiar. This is not to say that we must *make an effort* to stand out, whether it be by our dress, our attitudes, our speech or any other unusual thing that would bring attention to us. But we *are* required to bring attention to God by the *attitude we have or the actions we decide to take in various situations*. We live in a country that praises self-promotion. Self-promotion often requires gaining attention by gaining favor with people. The obedient people of God that we have looked at in this issue received attention because of seeking to do His will, not their own. The glory was God’s — with the three Jews as well as with Stephen. In Saul’s case the glory was *his*, perhaps he *thought* (using his own logic) that he would do the right thing by living in peace with his people. Our challenge is to do God’s will and give Him the glory, regardless of the consequences.

Whether or not God chooses to respond to *us* as He did to the three Jews or as He did to Stephen, is not for us to know. However, just a reading of Acts 5:1-10 should demonstrate to us that God can and *will*, if He so chooses, bring swift and sure punishment on those who do not approach Him with honesty and integrity. Ananias and Sapphira obviously decided to take the wrong action at a time of decision making. God *knew* their hearts just as He knows ours. We can’t trick Him by deceit as Ananias and Sapphira attempted to do or please Him by using our own logic as Saul attempted to do.

“For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” NIV (1 Thes. 2:3 & 4)

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DILIGENCE

“We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” — Hebrews 6:11

A ministry of Dennis and Sherri Owens

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We are very pleased to announce that Diligence is now available on line, thanks to our oldest son, Ryan. The web address where you may find past issues posted for reading, printing or sharing with friends or relatives is:

<http://www.gorfsystems.com/diligence/>

Now, on with our study! In the last several issues of *Diligence* we have been discussing various ways that members of the New Testament Church are a peculiar people. Throughout history, God’s people have *frequently* been faced with difficult choices — a choice to serve God, possibly making them peculiar from those who surrounded them or a decision to “go along to get along.” Many of us are very familiar with the story of Joshua and his statement recorded in Joshua 24:15:

“...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” KJV

A similar commitment was made by Peter and the other apostles after they had been commanded to “...not teach in His name.” Their response in Acts 5:29 was:

“...We ought to obey God rather than man.” KJV

Unfortunately, things have not changed all that much for those who still commit themselves to following God’s ways rather than man’s ways. (Isaiah 55:8&9 and Proverbs 14:12). Just like many of the people whom we read about in the Scriptures, believers today are bombarded with difficult choices that may determine how committed they are to following *God’s* ways. We just mentioned a couple of Bible people who obviously did not back down from declaring their allegiance to God regardless of the consequence. But let’s look more *closely* now at some others in the Bible who were faced with making difficult decisions and let’s also consider the *results* of the decision that each of them made.

Let’s begin by reading Daniel, chapter 3. In this chapter we find three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in a tough spot. They had good jobs, worshiped God, were well respected and had a pretty good life by the standards of the day. Until one day, King Nebuchadnezzar decided that the image he made of gold would be worshiped by all the people in the kingdom. The rules were laid out and heralded among the people. Everyone had the edict. The command recorded in Daniel 3:5 was:

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“that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up.” NAS

Who was to bow down? Daniel 3:4 tells us:

“...O peoples, nations and men of every language.” NAS

The penalty for not adhering to the rules was likewise spelled out. What were the consequences of not bowing down? Daniel 3:6 states:

“But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.” NAS

Every person had a decision to make. Those not committed to God found the practice acceptable. But those three Jews would have to change what they were committed to in order to survive this situation. What would they do?

We know what they did! They continued to serve God — even after the King gave them a *second* chance to bow down — and were thrown into the furnace to be burned. We read in this chapter how God preserved them but they went into the furnace *not knowing what the outcome would be*. Look at Daniel 3:17 and 18:

*“If the God whom we serve is able to save us from the blazing furnace and from your power, then He will. **But even if He doesn’t**, Your Majesty may be sure that we will not bow down to the gold statue that you have set up.” TEV*

They emerged not only alive and victorious but set a new standard of worship for the people — all because of their commitment to stand up for their beliefs rather than go along with the crowd (Daniel 3:28 & 29).

Now — another believer with quite a different outcome as the result of his decision: God chose to handle the situation with Stephen much differently than He did with those three Jews. Let’s look at Acts, chapters 6 and 7. In verses 11-14 of chapter 6, we’re told that members of the Synagogue bribed some men to give a false witness against Stephen which caused him to be arrested. Stephen took the opportunity to preach a lengthy and blistering sermon that so angered the Council that they became “furious and gnashed their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54). Acts 7:56 tells us that Stephen looked up and said:

“...I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” KJV

As we continue reading we learn that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. The outcome of his preaching had a different result this

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time. However it is worth noting that neither the three Jews nor Stephen were inhibited from their stand because of fear of the outcome. Faithfulness to God was what mattered — *regardless* of the consequence He might allow.

Now — What about King Saul in I Samuel 15:1-29? In verse 3 God delivered a message to King Saul (via Samuel). God said:

“Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.” NIV

Did God really include children and infants in this command? Yes, He did.

“But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and the cattle, the fat calves and lambs — everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak, they totally destroyed.” NIV (verse 9)

God was not pleased. He said:

“I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out my commands.” NAS (verse 11)

Saul however, told Samuel that he had carried out the command of God (verse 13). But Samuel *heard* the live stock and questioned Saul. Saul replied by using human logic:

“‘But I did obey the Lord,’ Saul said. ‘I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their King. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal.’” NIV (verses 20 & 21)

Samuel scolded Saul for not following God’s command (verses 22 & 23). Then Saul said to Samuel:

“I have sinned. I violated the Lord’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them.” NIV (verse 24)

Even with Saul’s admission of sin and begging for forgiveness, he was rejected by God as King of Israel (verses 24-28). God would not settle for a leader who was more concerned about what “the people” would think than obeying what He had commanded. Saul had an opportunity to do as the three Jews and Stephen had done and not fear the outcome but he failed his test. He “gave in to” the people.