DOCTRINE WITHOUT THE MACHINERY

When Character No Longer Matters

Somewhere along the way we decided a leader's character has little to do with how they lead. Anchored in Proverbs 29:2 (NLT), this study walks through the one law Scripture wrote for kings, Nathan's confrontation with David, the question of Cyrus, and a moral standard Americans have flipped from one side to the other within a single generation. With Scripture, history, check-in questions, and prayer prompts for keeping your conscience your own.

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Faith OVER FACTIONS

For everyone who wanders and feels far from home.

For the ones who left when the noise got too loud, and the ones still sitting in the back row wondering if they belong.

For the solo believer, the doubter, the tired, and the ones who feel alone in a crowded church.

You are not lost. You are on your way home.
You are not the only one. This is for you.

About Faith Over Factions

Faith Over Factions is a place for the spiritually homeless: people who still love Jesus but can't find Him in the noise of institutional religion or partisan faith. Everything here is free. No email address, no paywall, no algorithm deciding what you see.

You'll find reflections, portraits of Christians who resisted when it cost them something, devotionals for unsteady days, and a private Faith Journal for the questions you're not ready to say out loud. We don't take sides in the culture war. We take Jesus at His word and try to follow Him with honesty, humility, and a lot of grace for the stumbling.

Pull up a chair. You're welcome here.

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When Character No Longer Matters

About twelve years ago, a friend from Shanghai said something I've never been able to shake.

“The thing that amazes me about your politicians is that they don't even pretend to be honest.”

I didn't take him to be praising his own government. He knew perfectly well that people in power lie everywhere, his country included. What caught his attention was narrower and stranger than that. American political dishonesty seemed so open, so ordinary, and so readily accepted that nobody bothered to hide it anymore.

There's an old line from the French writer François de La Rochefoucauld: hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue. A politician who lies and then works hard to look honest is at least admitting that honesty is the standard. What my friend noticed was the tribute going unpaid. Not just the lie, but the disappearance of any felt need to cover it.

Twelve years later, I keep coming back to his words. Somewhere along the way we accepted a peculiar proposition: that the personal character of the people who govern us has little to do with whether they govern well.

We're told a leader can be dishonest, corrupt, sexually reckless, cruel, vindictive, or consumed by personal ambition and still lead well. That private conduct and public responsibility are separate matters. That what someone accomplishes matters more than who they are. And when uncomfortable questions come up, the familiar defenses appear. Nobody's perfect. Everyone has a past. We aren't electing a pastor. What matters is getting things done.

There's some truth buried in a few of those. We aren't electing religious leaders, and nobody in public office is free of shortcomings. But acknowledging human imperfection is a long way from declaring character irrelevant. Scripture has a lot to say about that distance, and what it says challenges some of the most comfortable assumptions in modern political life.

This isn't an article about one politician or one party. As you'll see, the argument that character doesn't matter has been made loudly from both sides of the aisle. Which side makes it usually depends on whose leader is in trouble.

What Does the Bible Say About Character in Leadership?

Scripture treats leadership as a trust held for the benefit of others, and it treats character as the thing that determines how that trust gets used. The measure it offers isn't the leader's popularity or victories. It's what happens to the people who live under that leader.

The biblical texts come from societies with political structures very different from ours. Ancient Israel had judges, kings, elders, and appointed officials. The early followers of Jesus lived under Roman imperial rule. We can't lift every instruction about an ancient king and apply it mechanically to a modern elected official. But the moral principles running through these passages are remarkably consistent. Leadership is a responsibility given for the good of others. It isn't an opportunity to accumulate wealth, reward allies, or advance personal interests.

Proverbs 29:2 puts it plainly:

> *"When the godly are in authority, the people rejoice. But when the wicked are in power, they groan."*
>
> Proverbs 29:2 (NLT)

Notice where the proverb points. Not at the ruler's popularity, personal wealth, political victories, or ability to dominate opponents. It points at the condition of the people. Do they rejoice, or do they groan?

That isn't a promise that every upright leader will govern well. Nor does it mean a corrupt person can never accomplish anything good. It's a statement about the relationship between the character of those in power and the well-being of those who live under them. The biblical measure of leadership starts with what happens to the people entrusted to a leader's care. That's a very different standard from the one we usually use.

Competence Without Character

When Moses was buckling under the weight of governing Israel, his father-in-law Jethro told him to share the load. The qualifications Jethro gave for the people Moses should appoint are revealing.

> *"But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten."*
>
> Exodus 18:21 (NLT)

There are four qualifications here. Capability comes first, and it matters. Leaders have to be able to do the job. But the other three are about the person: honesty, reverence for God, and a hatred of bribes. The passage doesn't suggest that administrative talent makes up for dishonesty. It treats competence and integrity as two requirements, not one requirement with an optional extra.

That makes sense. A person who is exceptionally capable and fundamentally dishonest may simply become exceptionally effective at exploiting others. Someone with remarkable organizational skill and no concern for justice can build a very efficient system of oppression. A brilliant strategist without compassion can win impressive victories and leave enormous suffering behind.

Competence tells us what a person is capable of doing. Character helps determine what they'll choose to do, and who they're willing to sacrifice along the way. We should be careful not to confuse the ability to get power with the wisdom to use it. They aren't the same thing.

The One Law Written for Kings

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 is the only passage in the Law of Moses that sets rules for a king, and almost every rule in it concerns the king's personal conduct. There is no economic program in it, no military doctrine, and no list of policy goals.

Israel was told that if it ever insisted on having a king, there would be conditions. He was not to build up a large stable of horses, which meant no military buildup for its own sake. He was not to multiply wives or pile up wealth.

> *"The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will turn his heart away from the LORD. And he must not accumulate large amounts of wealth in silver and gold for himself."*
>
> Deuteronomy 17:17 (NLT)

And he was to keep a copy of God's law with him and read it every day of his life, for a stated reason:

> *"This regular reading will prevent him from becoming proud and acting as if he is above his fellow citizens."*
>
> Deuteronomy 17:20 (NLT)

Those are what we would call private matters. His marriages. His bank account. His sense of himself. The one law Israel had for kings treats them as the heart of the job, because a heart that grows proud, acquisitive, and divided will eventually govern that way.

Solomon is the proof. He began his reign with a prayer for wisdom. He ended it with hundreds of wives, enormous wealth, a vast chariot force, and a heart turned toward other gods (1 Kings 10:26-11:4). Every boundary in Deuteronomy 17 fell, one at a time. When his son took the throne, the people came asking for relief from the heavy burdens Solomon had laid on them (1 Kings 12:4). The son refused, and the kingdom split. Solomon's private failures did not stay private. The people groaned.

Can a Leader's Integrity Be Compartmentalized?

The Bible's answer is no. Jesus taught that both faithfulness and dishonesty carry over as responsibility grows. A pattern of deception in small things doesn't reverse itself when the stakes get larger.

There are legitimate boundaries here, and they deserve to be stated honestly. Public officials keep a right to privacy. Their personal relationships are not automatically matters of public concern, and not every moral disagreement should become grounds for public condemnation. We should also distinguish carefully between allegations and established wrongdoing, between consensual conduct and exploitation, and between an isolated mistake and a sustained pattern of behavior.

But none of those distinctions establishes that character is irrelevant.

> *"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities."*
>
> Luke 16:10 (NLT)

The immediate context is stewardship, especially the handling of money and possessions. Jesus is challenging the assumption that someone can be untrustworthy with lesser responsibilities and somehow become trustworthy when handed greater ones. The principle reaches well beyond financial management. Integrity isn't something we can reliably switch on and off according to circumstances.

Someone who repeatedly deceives others doesn't automatically become truthful on entering public office. Someone who habitually exploits people in vulnerable positions doesn't necessarily abandon that behavior when given more authority. Someone who treats accountability as an inconvenience will likely carry that attitude into every institution they control.

This doesn't mean people can't change. They can. But genuine change involves acknowledgment, correction, accountability, and evidence of a different pattern of conduct. It can't simply be presumed because a person has acquired an important title. Public office doesn't transform character. It gives character a larger field to operate in. And the consequences no longer stay with the individual. They reach everyone affected by that person's decisions.

The Standard That Changes Sides

Within a single generation, Americans have argued both sides of the character question, and the side people took usually depended on which party's leader was under scrutiny.

In June 1998, with President Bill Clinton under investigation over his relationship with a White House intern, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution on the moral character of public officials. It noted reports that many Americans were willing to overlook misconduct by unrepentant officials “so long as economic prosperity prevails”. It urged Americans to act on the conviction that character does count in public office.[1]

That same year, most Americans were telling pollsters two things at once. Between January and August 1998, the share who told Gallup that honesty and trustworthiness did not describe the president rose from 57 to 67 percent.[2] Over the same year his job approval averaged nearly 64 percent and peaked at 73 percent in the days after he was impeached.[3] Many of his defenders argued exactly what the Baptists rejected: private conduct was private, and the job was getting done.

In 2011, the Public Religion Research Institute asked Americans whether an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their public duties. Among white evangelical Protestants, 30 percent said yes. They were the group least willing to separate private conduct from public office. In October 2016, PRRI asked again. This time 72 percent of white evangelicals said yes, a far bigger swing than any other religious group in the poll. White mainline Protestants and Catholics moved in the same direction, less dramatically.[4]

The argument didn't change. The defendant did.

I'm not laying this out to score a point against anybody. That's the whole problem. Each side remembers the other side's reversal and forgets its own. The record simply shows what Scripture already warned about. When a standard flips depending on whose leader is in question, it was never working as a standard. It was working as a loyalty test.

Didn't God Use Flawed Leaders?

Yes. But God using a person is not the same as God approving of what that person did, and Scripture never treats the two as the same.

Whenever questions come up about the conduct of powerful people, someone eventually reaches for the biblical examples. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed. Solomon, remembered for his wisdom, became entangled in the very excesses Israel's kings were warned against. Cyrus, a Persian ruler who did not worship Israel's God, played a central role in bringing the exiles home.

The argument usually runs like this. God used these people despite their failings, so we shouldn't let a leader's failings distract us from the good they might do. But that reasoning confuses two very different ideas. God's ability to bring good through flawed people is not divine approval of their wrongdoing.

What Nathan Did Not Say

The account of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11-12 is not a celebration of a powerful man's freedom to indulge himself. It's an account of the abuse of royal authority. David takes another man's wife. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, he tries to cover it up. When that fails, he arranges the circumstances that lead to Uriah's death.

Then the prophet Nathan comes to David with a story about a rich man who stole a poor man's only lamb. David is outraged. He vows that any man who would do such a thing deserves to die. And Nathan answers him:

> *"You are that man!"*
>
> 2 Samuel 12:7 (NLT)

Nathan doesn't excuse the wrongdoing because David is God's chosen king. He doesn't suggest that David's military victories outweigh his misconduct. He doesn't argue that preserving the kingdom requires overlooking the suffering of the people harmed. He confronts the king with the truth.

Notice what made it work. David had no trouble applying the standard. He applied it instantly, and harshly, to a man in a story. He just couldn't see it in his own life until someone held up the mirror.

David's repentance matters. God's mercy matters. But neither one erased the consequences.

> *"From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own."*
>
> 2 Samuel 12:10 (NLT)

The biblical narrative refuses to turn divine grace into permission for continued wrongdoing. And there's one more detail worth remembering. David's misconduct wasn't merely a private moral failure. It involved the misuse of royal authority, the manipulation of military command, and the destruction of a subordinate's life. His personal desires became a public injustice because he had the power to make them so. That is precisely why character matters in leadership. The greater the authority, the greater the damage when personal corruption becomes institutional conduct.

What About Cyrus?

Cyrus has been invoked in American political life in recent years to explain why believers might support a leader whose conduct they would otherwise reject. The comparison deserves a careful look at what Isaiah actually says.

Isaiah 45 calls Cyrus the Lord's anointed. Then God tells him why:

> *"And why have I called you for this work? Why did I call you by name when you did not know me? It is for the sake of Jacob my servant, Israel my chosen one."*
>
> Isaiah 45:4 (NLT)

Three things stand out. First, the emphasis is on God's sovereignty, not on Cyrus's virtue. The point of the passage is that God can accomplish his purposes through someone who doesn't know him at all. Second, nobody in Israel chose Cyrus. The exiles in Babylon didn't campaign for him or vote him in. Isaiah is describing what God would do, not instructing God's people whom to back. Third, God says similar things about

rulers no one would hold up as a model. In Jeremiah 25:9 he calls Nebuchadnezzar, the king who destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, “my servant” in the Hebrew text. Nobody reads that as an endorsement of Babylon.

If being used by God made a ruler worthy of his people's loyalty, the exiles would have owed it to Nebuchadnezzar too. God's freedom to use anyone is a comfort about God. It isn't a permission slip for us.

Grace Is Not a Qualification for Office

Forgiveness is central to following Jesus. But forgiveness and trust are not interchangeable. A person may be forgiven without immediately being trusted with responsibility over others. Someone who has abused authority may genuinely repent and still need to surrender that authority. Someone who has acted dishonestly may receive mercy and still remain accountable for the harm done. Scripture doesn't present repentance as a convenient escape from consequences. It calls for a change of direction that becomes visible in conduct. (We've looked at how this plays out inside churches in Scandalous Pastors: Why Plurality of Elders Is the New Testament Model.)

When Paul lists the qualifications for overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, he emphasizes self-control, sound judgment, integrity, and a good reputation with outsiders. Those are instructions for leadership within the community of believers, not a religious test for public office. The Constitution forbids one of those, and rightly so. Still, they reveal something about the biblical understanding of responsibility. A desire to lead is not enough. Talent is not enough. Religious language is not enough. The person's conduct has to show they can be trusted with what they're asking for.

That brings us to a distinction we've become strangely reluctant to make. A person's worth is not determined by their suitability for leadership. We can recognize someone's humanity, extend compassion, and believe in their capacity for redemption without concluding that they should be handed extraordinary power. Mercy doesn't require naivety. Forgiveness doesn't require abandoning discernment. And grace doesn't eliminate accountability.

Does Character Matter If a Leader Gets Results?

Scripture repeatedly rejects the idea that desirable outcomes justify corrupt means. The prophets judged rulers by how they used power, especially toward people with little power of their own, not by the size of their accomplishments.

This is the argument of expediency. The economy improves. A favored policy advances. An opponent is defeated. A particular institution gains influence. And because the outcome is considered beneficial, questions about the methods used or the character of the people responsible become secondary. Sometimes they disappear altogether. It's worth remembering that the 1998 Baptist resolution named this exact temptation: overlooking misconduct as long as prosperity holds.

Proverbs 16:12 ties the stability of a throne to justice and says a king should detest wrongdoing. Isaiah 10:1-2 condemns those who write unjust laws and strip vulnerable people of their rights. Micah 3 confronts rulers who devour the very people they're supposed to protect. These passages refuse to separate the exercise of power from its moral consequences. (For more on how the prophets held rulers accountable, see Who Is Responsible for the Poor?)

A government may produce impressive economic figures while permitting exploitation. It may win military victories while inflicting terrible suffering. It may proclaim national greatness while denying justice to the people with the least influence. None of those outcomes can be evaluated responsibly by looking at political success alone.

Psalm 72 offers a revealing picture of what righteous leadership looks like:

> *"He will rescue the poor when they cry to him; he will help the oppressed, who have no one to defend them. He feels pity for the weak and the needy, and he will rescue them. He will redeem them from oppression and violence, for their lives are precious to him."*
>
> Psalm 72:12-14 (NLT)

That isn't incidental. It's central to the biblical vision of just government. A ruler's greatness isn't established by the power they accumulate, but by how that power is used toward those who have little of their own.

That principle should make all of us uncomfortable, because it requires looking past the interests of our preferred faction. Every political coalition has people whose suffering it would rather not discuss. The list is different depending on which coalition you ask. Psalm 72 doesn't let any of them off the hook. It asks us to measure the consequences of leadership beyond the circle of people who benefit from it.

When Loyalty Replaces Moral Judgment

So far we've looked at the character of leaders. But there's another side to this problem: the character of the people who support them.

Perhaps the most troubling thing in political life isn't the misconduct of powerful people. It's how easily ordinary people can be persuaded to excuse conduct they would otherwise condemn. Dishonesty becomes acceptable when it advances a favored cause. Cruelty becomes strength when it's aimed at an unpopular group. Corruption becomes an unfortunate necessity when the alternative is losing influence. Sexual misconduct becomes irrelevant when the accused promises to deliver. And the people who object are accused of disloyalty.

The moral standard hasn't disappeared entirely. It has become conditional. We keep recognizing wrongdoing when it shows up among our opponents. We just become less willing to see it among our allies. Like David, we can spot the injustice instantly in somebody else's story.

> *"What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter."*
>
> Isaiah 5:20 (NLT)

Isaiah is describing a society whose moral judgment has become distorted. A few verses later he names one of the ways it happens: "They take bribes to let the wicked go free, and they punish the innocent" (Isaiah 5:23, NLT). The danger isn't only that people do wrong. It's that they start changing the language of morality to accommodate it. What was once condemned becomes defensible. What was once

shameful becomes admirable. What was once recognized as corruption becomes evidence of toughness. And the people who refuse to go along with the reversal are treated as the problem.

When we excuse behavior in our allies that we condemn in our opponents, we are no longer applying a moral standard. We are defending an allegiance.

This is where political loyalty can become spiritually destructive. Not because political participation is wrong. Not because believers should withdraw from public life. Paul calls governing authorities God's servants for our good, and as we've written before, that's a standard, not a blank check. Loyalty becomes destructive when it demands that we abandon truth, justice, or compassion. At that point it's asking for something that belongs to God. Our conscience is not the property of a political movement. Our understanding of right and wrong can't depend on who happens to benefit. And our loyalty to Jesus can't be suspended whenever obedience becomes politically inconvenient.

The People Who Groan

Go back to Proverbs 29:2. When the wicked are in power, the people groan.

There's something painfully human about that image. The groaning of people living under injustice rarely gets the attention that the speeches of the powerful get. It's heard in households struggling to make it to the end of the month. In communities worn down by corruption. Among workers exploited by the people who control their livelihoods. Among people who discover that the institutions meant to protect them have become indifferent to their suffering. And among those who've stopped believing anyone in authority is listening.

The prophets paid close attention to those voices. They understood that corruption isn't just a defect in a ruler's character. It produces suffering. When leaders pursue personal enrichment, resources get diverted from legitimate public purposes. When they demand personal loyalty over truth, accountability breaks down. When they treat vulnerable people as expendable, injustice becomes easier to build into the system. When they normalize dishonesty, public trust starts to collapse.

These aren't abstract moral concerns. They're consequences people live with. The prophets addressed rulers, judges, merchants, religious authorities, and whole societies, because they understood that wrongdoing can become embedded in the structures through which power is exercised. That is why the character of leadership matters so much. A corrupt heart entrusted with enormous authority can produce suffering on an enormous scale.

Can a Christian Vote for a Candidate With Serious Character Flaws?

Often, yes. Most elections offer imperfect choices, and Scripture doesn't hand anyone a ballot guide. What Scripture won't allow is letting a vote rewrite your conscience.

None of this means leadership requires moral perfection. If it did, nobody would qualify. Every one of us carries weaknesses, failures, blind spots, and regrets, and the biblical story is full of imperfect people called to meaningful work. But Scripture doesn't ask us to pretend those imperfections are meaningless, and it doesn't treat all failures as equal. There is a difference between someone who struggles with weakness and someone who cultivates corruption. Between someone who acknowledges wrongdoing and someone who celebrates it. Between someone who accepts accountability and someone who uses power to escape it. Between someone who seeks reconciliation and someone who keeps creating new victims. Those distinctions are part of moral discernment.

Voting involves competing responsibilities, uncertain outcomes, and real disagreements about policy. A believer may weigh all of that and conclude that a flawed candidate is the better of the options in front of them. Thoughtful Christians land in different places for reasons they hold honestly before God. That's what discernment in the gray areas looks like.

What changes everything is what happens after the vote. Choosing someone is not the same as defending them. A vote doesn't obligate you to call dishonesty strategic or cruelty strong. It doesn't make you anyone's spokesperson. The moment a vote turns into a vow to excuse whatever comes next, the allegiance has started demanding something that belongs to God. You can cast a vote you feel conflicted about. You can't let that vote decide what you're allowed to call wrong.

The same discernment applies to the language candidates use. A leader doesn't need to share our religious beliefs to show honesty, compassion, humility, and a commitment to justice. And someone who loudly professes religious devotion doesn't automatically have those qualities. In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus tells his followers to recognize false prophets by their fruit. The immediate warning is about false teachers, but the principle of testing claims against observable conduct applies here too. Religious declarations are not a substitute for integrity. Public displays of devotion are not evidence that someone uses power justly. The question is never how convincingly someone talks about goodness. It's whether their conduct shows it.

The Character of a People

It would be easy to end this by condemning corrupt leaders. It would also leave the harder question unanswered. What responsibility do we carry when we knowingly excuse wrongdoing because the person doing it serves our interests?

In a representative democracy, citizens help decide who holds public authority. That brings real opportunities for accountability, and real moral challenges. Scripture has long recognized that rulers often reflect the people who wanted them. In 1 Samuel 8, Israel got the king it asked for, warnings and all. (We explored that passage in God's Judgment and Leadership: When Power Reflects Us.)

Scripture doesn't remove the need for careful judgment. But it does challenge our willingness to trade moral conviction for political advantage. It asks whether we've become so invested in getting the outcomes we want that we no longer care how they're achieved. Whether we've confused strength with domination. Whether we've mistaken loyalty for virtue. Whether we'd defend conduct that would trouble us deeply if someone outside our political circle did it. And whether our desire to win has become more important than our responsibility to stay truthful.

Those are uncomfortable questions. They should be. The erosion of moral standards doesn't happen only among people who hold office. It happens whenever people decide that principles are negotiable if the stakes are high enough. Eventually those exceptions become habits, and those habits shape the moral character of a whole society.

What We Can Learn From Jesus

Jesus never held political office. He didn't organize an electoral movement or offer a program for governing the Roman Empire. But his teaching consistently overturns the way human beings think about power.

> *"You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant."*
>
> Mark 10:42-43 (NLT)

He grounds it in his own life: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NLT).

This teaching is about leadership among his disciples, but it poses a profound challenge to every culture that celebrates domination as strength. Jesus reverses the usual direction of power. The greatest isn't the one who commands the most obedience. It's the one who serves. The most admirable leader isn't necessarily the one who can impose their will most effectively. It's the one who recognizes the humanity and dignity of everyone affected by their decisions. The measure of leadership isn't simply whether authority can get something done. It's whether that authority is exercised with justice, restraint, humility, and concern for others.

That doesn't make the hard decisions of governing any easier. It does challenge the idea that power itself is evidence of virtue. Power reveals what a person is willing to do. Service reveals who they believe that power is for.

When We Stop Expecting Better

I still think about my friend's observation. He was astonished that American politicians didn't even pretend to be honest. But I wonder whether the greater tragedy is that so many of us have stopped expecting honesty in the first place. The tribute isn't going unpaid only by politicians. We've stopped asking for it.

We've grown used to explanations for conduct that once would have provoked serious moral concern. We're told that integrity is admirable but impractical. That corruption is unfortunate but unavoidable. That personal misconduct is irrelevant if the political objectives are met. That the world is too dangerous to insist on moral consistency. And, most troubling of all, that we sometimes have to abandon our principles in order to protect them.

There's a contradiction in that reasoning that deserves our attention. If preserving what we value requires abandoning the very principles that give those things value, what exactly are we preserving?

Scripture doesn't promise that righteous leadership will eliminate every difficulty. It doesn't guarantee that honest people will always win. And it doesn't suggest that good character alone is enough to govern wisely. Competence matters. Judgment matters. Experience matters. The ability to make hard decisions matters. But character matters too, because leadership is never just a collection of decisions detached from the person making them. Those decisions come out of values, desires, loyalties, habits, and convictions. When those are corrupted, the consequences eventually reach past the leader. They reach the people. The people who rejoice, and the people who groan.

Maybe the question we most need to ask isn't whether flawed people can accomplish good things. Of course they can. We're all flawed. The question is whether we've become so used to excusing corruption that we no longer recognize what it's doing to us. The standards we abandon in defense of powerful people don't stay abandoned only in politics. They follow us into our relationships, our communities, our institutions, and our understanding of what it means to live with integrity. Sooner or later, they shape the kind of society we become.

The character of our leaders matters. So does the character of a people willing to excuse them. That's a responsibility none of us can delegate.

A Question Worth Carrying

> Nathan didn't win the argument with David by debating him. He told a story about someone else and let David pass judgment first. So before you defend or condemn the conduct of someone in authority, try Nathan's method on yourself:
>
> **Would I judge this behavior differently if the person belonged to a political movement I opposed?**
>
> If the answer is yes, the first character worth examining may not be the leader's. It may be your own. Following Jesus calls us to something more demanding than political loyalty. It calls us to truthfulness when truth is inconvenient, compassion when compassion is unpopular, and integrity when integrity costs something. Those responsibilities don't disappear in the voting booth. They follow us wherever we go.

Footnotes

1. Southern Baptist Convention, *Resolution on Moral Character of Public Officials*, adopted June 1998, Salt Lake City, Utah. sbc.net.
2. Richard Brody, analysis of 1998 Gallup and Washington Post/ABC News polling on the Lewinsky affair, PollingReport. pollingreport.com.
3. Gallup, *Presidential Job Approval: Bill Clinton's High Ratings in the Midst of Crisis, 1998*. news.gallup.com.
4. PRRI/Brookings survey, October 2016, compared with PRRI/Religion News Service survey, 2011, as reported in Danielle Kurtzleben, *Poll: White Evangelicals Have Warmed to Politicians Who Commit 'Immoral' Acts*, NPR, October 23, 2016. npr.org.

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Check-In Questions and Prayer Prompts

Take these slowly. Write in the Faith Journal or on the lines below. What matters is that each question gets an honest answer somewhere.

1 Would you judge it differently if they were on the other side?

Pick one public figure you've defended in the last year. Write down exactly what you defended. Then put the name of someone from the other party in its place and read it again.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, I'm good at spotting the stolen lamb in somebody else's story. Hold up the mirror, and give me the nerve to keep looking."

2 Which of the familiar defenses have you reached for?

Nobody's perfect. We aren't electing a pastor. What matters is getting things done. Be honest about which one comes out of your mouth first, and who you were protecting when it did.

PRAYER PROMPT

"God, I've used those lines more than I'd like to admit. Show me who they were really covering for."

3 Whose suffering would your side rather not talk about?

Psalm 72 measures a ruler by the poor and the people with no one to defend them. Name one group your own political circle tends to skip, and write down what you actually know about their lives.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Father, their lives are precious to You. Make them precious to me too, even when it's inconvenient for my side."

4 Has a vote you cast turned into a vow?

You can make an imperfect choice in good conscience. Now write down one thing you've excused since then that you would have called wrong before.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Jesus, I don't want my conscience to belong to anybody but You. Where I've handed it over, give it back."

5 Where have you been trusted with a little?

Luke 16:10 applies to you too. Think about the small authority you actually hold, at home, at work, at church, and the places where honesty has quietly become negotiable.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, before I ask anything of the people in power, make me faithful with the little You've given me. Start with me."

A Blessing for the Road

May the God who sees the wanderer find you wherever you are tonight.

May Christ, who never needed you to have it all together, meet you in the questions you're still carrying.

May the Spirit steady your feet when the noise gets loud, and quiet your heart when the world won't.

Go gently. Tell the truth. Love the ones in front of you.

And when you fall, and you will, may grace be the first thing you find when you get back up.

You're Always Welcome Here

If this helped, don't carry it alone. Write your answers in the Faith Journal, free and private. Share this with someone who's wandering. And come find us at faithoverfactions.com, on Substack, Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram.

Faith Journal

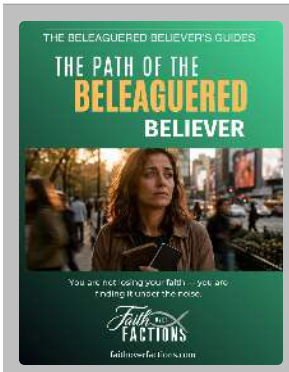
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The porch light is always on.

Take Something for the Road

You don't have to walk this alone, and you don't have to pay to keep going. Here are a few companions for the journey. The four Guides are free. No email address, no catch.

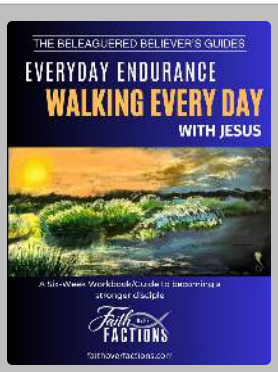
THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES



The Path of the Beleaguered Believer

"You are not losing your faith, you are finding it under the noise." For the one who keeps getting up.

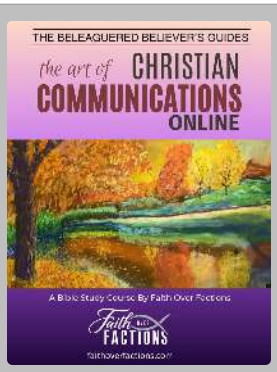
FREE DOWNLOAD



Everyday Endurance

Walking every day with Jesus: a six-week workbook for becoming a stronger disciple.

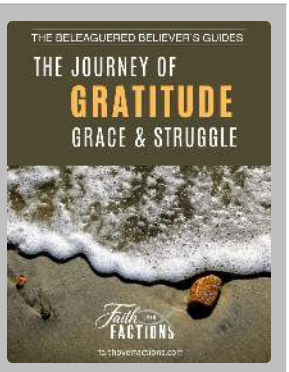
FREE DOWNLOAD



The Art of Christian Communications Online

A Bible study course on speaking truth with grace when the internet won't.

FREE DOWNLOAD



The Journey of Gratitude, Grace & Struggle

You don't have to feel grateful to begin. You only have to turn toward the One who hasn't left.

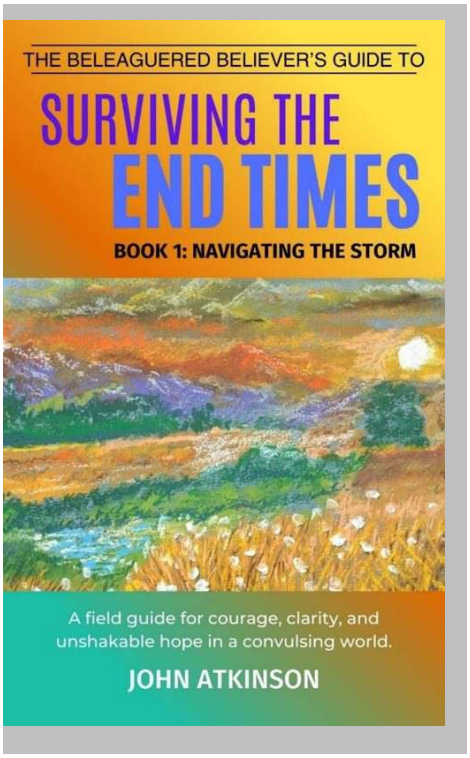
FREE DOWNLOAD

And a Quiet Place to Write It All Down

The Faith Journal is a private space for the questions in these pages, the prayers you mean, and the faith that doesn't fit neatly anymore. Write honestly. Share prayer requests only when you're ready. Free, private by default, no comment threads, no algorithm.

When You're Ready to Go Deeper

If something in these pages stirred you, you don't have to walk the rest of the way alone.



The Beleaguered Believer's Survival Guide to the End Times, Book 1: Navigating the Storm is a field guide for weary disciples trying to follow Jesus with a clear head and a steady heart while the world gets loud and cruel. It isn't a prophecy chart or a book of fear. It's teaching, reflection, and practice to help you:

- See challenges through Kingdom eyes
- Discern truth in an age of deception
- Endure hardship without losing heart
- Love fiercely when love grows cold
- Stand firm in Christ when the world convulses

Available on Amazon

Kindle (free with Kindle Unlimited), paperback, and hardcover.

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Grace and peace for the road.

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