



2ND QUARTER

BIBLE CHARACTERS

**WHO REFUSED
TO PUT**

#GODFIRST



Dear heavenly Father, we worship You this morning with our tithe and offerings. We pray for the courage to put You first in our lives. In the name of Jesus, amen.

APRIL 3, 2021

When Judas refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Judas, who refused to put God first?

The other disciples believed Judas was the perfect disciple. He was intelligent and very competent. He also believed Jesus was the promised Messiah. However, Judas wanted to follow Jesus closely so he would obtain a high position in the kingdom of God.

Ellen White reminds us that “the Saviour read the heart of Judas; He knew the depths of iniquity to which, unless delivered by the grace of God, Judas would sink. In connecting this man with Himself, He placed him where he might, day by day, be brought in contact with the outflowing of His own unselfish love. If he would open his heart to Christ, divine grace would banish the demon of selfishness, and even Judas might become a subject of the kingdom of God” (The Desire of Ages, page 294).

Many of us have talents and abilities that help us achieve so much in our careers and local church leadership. Like Judas, it is possible for us to believe in Jesus while we are slaves to our own selfishness. Judas was in charge of the money so he could experience the joy of giving in a transformative way. Putting God first in our tithe and

promise is a tangible way Jesus is also transforming our hearts.

Like Judas, we are also tempted to follow Jesus so we can get our mansion in heaven. However, the Bible doesn’t encourage anyone to desire heaven because of the wealth. When Judas asks to become a disciple, Jesus simply responds:

“The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:19, 20).

When Judas denied Jesus and eventually committed suicide, his selfishness finally won the war for his heart. Money had no value any longer, so the 30 coins became a curse and a reminder of his failures. God is inviting you and me to put His kingdom first in everything we do. Money is a blessing from God only when we allow Jesus to defeat selfishness in our hearts.

Judas refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God’s love compels us to put His kingdom first, while Judas’ example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



**Dear heavenly Father, we
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APRIL 10, 2021

When Adam & Eve refused to put God First

When Adam and Eve refused to put God First
Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Adam and Eve, who refused to put God first in the most decisive moment of their lives?

Adam and Eve had everything. Their home was beautiful. Their work was profoundly meaningful. They loved each other and they had the best food in the world. Literally. They experienced peace from sunrise to sunset. Not only our kind of peace—the absence of trouble—but God’s peace—Shalom, the absolute harmony of everything.

They understood the ultimate hierarchy of our planet. God is above all. Humans—male and female—stand side by side ordering and subduing the earth, which is beneath them in this hierarchy. As long as they lived under this reality, everything was perfect.

But one day Eve and Adam decided to rebel against this hierarchy and eat the fruit with the hope that it would turn them into gods. This destruction of the hierarchy represented the disruption of Shalom and it brought death. The Bible uses the word sin to describe any disruption of Shalom.

When someone takes a substance and elevates it to an existential level by saying, “I can’t live without this ‘thing’”, they are disrupting Shalom and the consequences are selfishness, greed and, eventu-

ally, death. All drugs and materialism fall into this category. When we take another human being and elevate them to become icons similar to gods, we disrupt Shalom and this brings depression, anxiety and, eventually, death.

The lesson from Adam and Eve’s experience is that God is God and we are not. This is a fundamental truth in our universe. When we read in scripture “God says”, we are constantly tempted, like Adam and Eve, to rationalise and find our “own truth”. This is sin and it leads to death.

God commanded us to bring our tithe and offerings. God is God and we are not. However, like Adam and Eve, we are also tempted to be our own gods and act differently. God grants us that freedom, but He doesn’t remove all consequences. Adam and Eve left the garden that day but hoped for the salvation God promised to bring.

Today we have the assurance of our salvation through Jesus. However, like Adam and Eve, we are tempted avoid putting God first when there is a cost. Adam and Eve refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the people around them. God’s love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Adam and Eve’s example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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APRIL 17, 2021

When Cain Refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Cain, who refused to put God first?

Adam and Eve had been cast out of the Garden of Eden when Cain was born. They experienced hardship together. Adam worked hard to grow sustenance from the earth and his children certainly helped when they were old enough to start working.

Cain focused on agriculture. Abel kept flocks. Both observed carefully how their parents talked about God and told stories of the garden. Both heard how God sacrificed the first animal for the forgiveness of their sins and to cover their shame. Both Cain and Abel wanted to worship God.

When they came of age, the Bible says they both brought an offering from the best of what they had. Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock, while Cain brought some of the first fruits from the soil. God looked with favour on the offering Abel brought, but rejected Cain's offering. Cain became furious. Not at God and not even at himself. He was furious with Abel, his brother.

Rejection isn't something human beings know how to deal with well. We hate being rejected and much of our lives is spent doing everything we can to avoid rejection. We sacrifice many years studying, so we are not rejected when applying for a job. We sacrifice time and money dressing up and taking care of ourselves, so we are not rejected romantically. We

sacrifice our talents raising resources, so our credit card isn't rejected at the store.

Despite our best efforts, however, rejection still comes. In this case, Cain clearly rejected God's example of what an acceptable offering should have been. In humility, Cain should have arranged with his brother to have an animal sacrifice. He didn't. Perhaps he thought he would do his best and that should have been enough.

Sometimes we decide to make our own rules when it comes to our offering. This is a mistake. God is God and we are not. The instructions on what we should do with our tithes and offerings are clear and we must follow them.

Once rejected, Cain could not bring himself to be vulnerable and talk to God, his parents or even his brother. Without any resistance, resentment took over Cain. God tried to help but Cain rejected God too. Sin took over his heart and he surrendered all control to his anger and violence. Cain would go down in history as the first murderer.

Cain refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Cain's example is a warning for us today. But we don't have to be like Cain. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, let's put God first.



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APRIL 24, 2021

When Samson refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Samson, who refused to put God first?

Samson was born as a Nazarene. This meant he had to live a certain way. First of all, he should not drink wine, grape juice or anything that came from the vine. He should not touch dead bodies and—most famously—Nazarenes should not cut their hair.

Since his younger years, Samson was a strong and disagreeable boy. When he came of age, the Lord led him to a young Philistine woman. Meeting her is described in this way:

“Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. . . .

Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion’s carcass, and in it he saw a swarm of bees and some honey. He scooped out the honey with his hands and ate as he went along” (Judges 14:5–9).

Did you notice it? Samson liked to live on the edge

between right and wrong. God’s instructions were clear: stay away from grapes and dead bodies. In this one short passage, he disobeyed both instructions. Later it would be easier for him to allow his hair to be cut as he already chosen the rebellious route.

No-one wakes up on day and decides to reject God. There is always a series of small decisions when we fail to put God first. When we notice our strength hasn’t left us, we convince ourselves we are still on the right track. God invites us to put Him first today, so we are not victims of our enemy like Samson was.

When Samson woke up to the spiritual corruption of his heart, he immediately called out to God and God answered. In fact, the Bible tells the story that every prayer Samson prayed was answered. God was merciful with Samson and He will be merciful with us. Even if you were not faithful with your tithe and offerings in the past, you can always start today.

Samson refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God’s love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Samson’s example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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MAY 1, 2021

When Eli's sons refused to Put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Eli, who refused to put God first?

Eli was a great man. He took his duties as a high priest seriously. During the time of the judges, people came to worship God from everywhere. Eli was always ready to protect the tabernacle and lead people in worship.

Thousands came to the tabernacle every year and Eli was ready to help them. One day he prayed with a woman who was asking for a child and God answered their prayers. Once that child was born, his mother Hannah decided to put God first and bring the boy to serve in the tabernacle .

Eli taught Samuel everything he knew about God and the priestly service. Then one day, God spoke to Eli through the boy. You might remember the story of God calling Samuel three times in the middle of the night. What we often forget is the content of the message that God wanted to deliver.

Eli had been so focused on the people of Israel that he had not paid enough attention to his own sons. God had previously impressed on Eli the importance of educating his sons to put God first. Instead, Eli refused to discipline and educate them. The results were terrible.

Eli's sons became priests who refused to put God first. They had no respect for the offerings brought to the tabernacle by faithful Israelites. In fact, the Bible says:

"This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt" (1 Samuel 2:17).

This is a devastating expression. Treating the Lord's offerings with contempt meant they despised the offerings and had no respect or reverence for them. God didn't take that lightly and eventually both of Eli's sons were killed by the Philistines. Eli died on the same day when he collapsed after hearing the news about the capture of the Ark of the Covenant.

Sometimes we don't give our tithe and offerings the respect and reverence they deserve. They are a reflection of our connection and respect for our Creator.

Eli's sons refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Eli's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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MAY 8, 2021

When Saul refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Saul, who refused to put God first?

Saul was tall and handsome. He stood head and shoulders above other men. He was the perfect candidate to become the first king of Israel. Saul was 30 years old when he became king and he reigned for 42 years.

During this time, Saul did many things right. However, he constantly refused to follow God's instructions completely. Saul seemed to know better, to find a different path, to improve on what God had said.

Some of us are always tempted to rationalise our own desires. Others provide internal explanations why they follow their own plan when it comes to tithe and offerings. Putting God first was not easy for Saul and it certainly isn't easy for us.

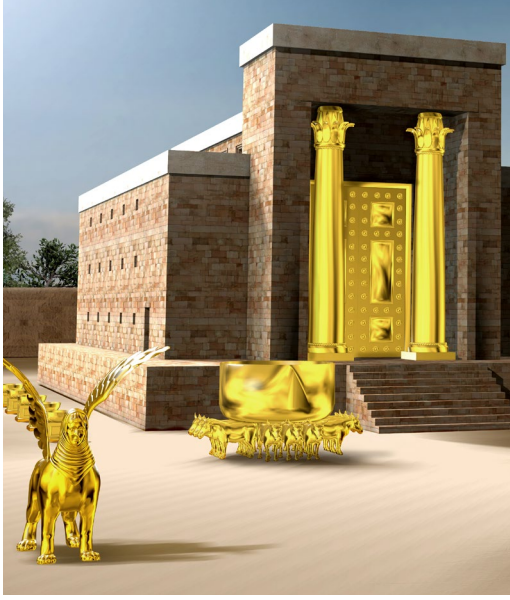
Saul continued on this path until God rejected him as king. God stepped back from protecting Saul to the point that an evil spirit tormented him. God grants us the free will to reject Him and His blessings. Saul turned evil and spent much of his energy and resources pursuing his loyal servant David.

David had been an amazing soldier and musician from the first moment Saul met him. Saul's son Jonathan was best friends with David. Even though David did nothing against Saul, Saul still wanted to kill him. The reason? Jealousy.

Later in his life, Saul turned to necromancers, hoping to hear God's voice again. But God doesn't speak through spiritualism. Even as Saul tried to return to God, he used methods forbidden by God. When we refuse to put God first in the small things, eventually we will always go too far.

Perhaps you have not been putting God first in your tithe and offerings or in another area of your life. God is merciful and will always forgive you immediately. You can start putting him first in your life today.

Saul refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Saul's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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MAY 15, 2021

When Solomon refused to put God first

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Solomon, who refused to put God first?

Everything started well for Solomon. The weight of the crown led him to ask for wisdom—the one thing he needed most. His request was fulfilled. And God also blessed Solomon’s reign with wealth, health and prosperity.

In time, however, Solomon’s wisdom turned into rationalisation. He used his intelligence and intellect to provide rational excuses as to why he broke many of God’s established laws.

Solomon used forced labour to build the house of the Lord as that must have seemed more efficient. Solomon married princesses from many other nations, so he could forge peace treaties with his enemies.

Solomon built altars to his wives’ gods as a way of welcoming them into his kingdom.

Solomon built his palace to be three times larger than the temple so he could accommodate his large household.

All of these rationalisations seemed to make sense and, at first, brought much wealth to the kingdom. However, they led to high taxes and injustices that were not sustainable. God has given the laws that lead to long-term prosperity and peace, but Solo-

mon used his intellect to bend them according to his pleasure. Solomon did not put God first and Israel was divided into two kingdoms within months of his death.

Today it is still common to find highly intelligent and knowledgeable people rationalising the breaking of God’s law. Putting God first means taking His word seriously and following it. The simplicity of a child following the instructions of a loving parent is perhaps the best antidote to our own demise.

God stands ready to open the doors to health, wealth and prosperity to many of us, according to His plans for our lives. Sometimes God keeps a door shut because our faith and future would be compromised if we were to walk through it.

God’s faithfulness evokes our own response. If we are faithful with the small things, God will put us in charge of greater things. We are stewards, glad to serve the Master in taking care of His resources.

Solomon refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God’s love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Solomon’s example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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MAY 22, 2021

When Israel refused to put God first

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Israel, who refused to put God first?

When Moses returned to Egypt to free the people of Israel, it was clear that they weren't ready. Centuries of slavery had corroded their vision of God and themselves. Nonetheless, God delivered on His promise to Abraham.

Once in the desert, they were technically free. Except they had no idea how free people lived. They would sooner return to bondage than rely on a God they could not see. But God was patient with them, demonstrating His love daily through the cloud, the fire and manna.

God's law was the set of instructions they needed to learn how to be free. This was especially true of the Sabbath, which clearly outlines how to worship God and how to respect human beings and creation alike.

But their most decisive moment as a people wasn't related to the Sabbath or the law. They were to be tested on their reason and their faith. When the 12 spies were sent as representative of the tribes to survey the land, they did not return with conflicting reports. All spies agreed about the quality of the land. It was exactly as it has been described. But they diverged in their interpretation of the facts.

Joshua and Caleb were rational. They built their case on the fact God had freed them already from the most powerful nation on earth at the time. This mighty salvation was clear evidence that God would continue to fulfill His promises. They were willing to put God first because of the evidence they had seen.

Along with the rest of the people of Israel, the other 10 spies were overtaken with irrational fear. They refused to put God first because they chose to ignore the evidence of how God had led them in the past. The consequences were devastating. God decided to keep that entire generation wandering in the desert until their death. Only their children would inherit Canaan.

Sometimes we are like those 10 spies. We have already seen first-hand how God is faithful when we take our tithe and offerings seriously. Sometimes, however, we are still tempted to ignore the facts and give in to fear. Putting God first in our tithe and offerings means trusting the evidence of what we have already seen.

Israel refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the world around them. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Israel's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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MAY 29, 2021

When the Pharisees refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from the Pharisees, who refused to put God first?

Pharisees and teachers of the law were among the most respected people in Israel in the early first century. They had dedicated their lives to the study and practice of scripture. Most could recite the Torah by heart and tried to follow each of its precepts. Their ability to follow the Bible with extreme precision gave them a sense of safety and pride. After all, God promised to bless those who keep His commandments.

When Jesus started preaching, however, he turned the law from something difficult to follow to something impossible to follow. Jesus pointed to the principles of the law, such as love and compassion. This was a profound disruption to the hierarchy of the Pharisees who valued wealth and positions of authority. On one occasion Jesus addresses them directly:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23, 24).

The Pharisees would go to the extreme of counting how many new leaves of mint grew in their garden and would take the 10th leaf to the temple. Jesus was very direct with these religious leaders who fol-

lowed the law to the minutest degree but failed to see justice, mercy and faith as the reason the law was given. Jesus was clear: continue counting the leaves of mint but seek justice, mercy and faith.

In light of this, two things are no longer surprising. The first is the fact that Pharisees were the main force behind killing Jesus. They could not bear a teacher who rejected the hierarchy they had established for themselves. The second event that is no longer surprising is how many marginalised people followed Jesus. These were the people who had been told they weren't good enough for God and should stay out. Jesus reminded everyone that no-one is good enough, and God was ready to accept them exactly as they were and then transform them.

It is easy to see these same dynamics in every church today. Some are extremely faithful to God in everything. Others seem to struggle to keep up. God reminds us that none of us are good enough. We are welcomed into the Kingdom of God through Jesus and His Spirit is transforming us to be like Jesus. Putting God first means that we should count our mint leaves and act with compassion.

The Pharisees refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the people around them. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while the Pharisees' example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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JUNE 5, 2021

When the Rich Young Ruler refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from the rich young ruler, who refused to put God first?

When Jesus met the rich young ruler, the disciples might have been excited to have someone with financial wealth join the group. That didn't last long as Jesus asked the man to sell everything he had and give to the poor. Here is the story of what happened:

"Jesus said to him, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'

When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible'" (Matthew 19:21–26).

What the rich young ruler did not realise was sim-

ple: the experience of salvation and full connection with God and humanity required the giving away of his possessions. The Bible would refer to this experience as Shalom, a total harmony and peace with God, humankind, oneself and nature.

To those of us who have accumulated wealth, regardless of how small that wealth might be, we are also tempted to keep it safe. Wealth can give us a feeling of security and power. In itself, wealth is a blessing from the Lord. As soon as we begin to believe it is the result of our work and should not be shared with anyone, it can turn into a curse.

The rich young ruler put his wealth first. Jesus wept when that happened because it was a tragedy for the sincere and greedy young rich ruler to miss out on salvation because of his wealth. Putting God first means putting our wealth in second place. Generosity is a non-negotiable characteristic of the Kingdom of God.

The young rich ruler refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him and the people around him. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while the young rich ruler's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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JUNE 12, 2021

When Ananias and Sapphira refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Ananias and Sapphira, who refused to put God first?

They really wanted to put God first. They believed in Jesus and are likely to have been baptised with the Holy Spirit. But Ananias and Sapphira found it difficult to keep their promises to God.

At first, they said they would give all of the funds they received for their land. This is a generous offer, above and beyond what God had asked. Before the sale, they must have been happy to make this promise. Perhaps it was the peer pressure of watching many other people sell their possessions and give it all to the apostles.

The problem came when Ananias and Sapphira had the money in their hands. Greed set in. They started to imagine all of the things they could buy with that money. Greed birthed the plan and the plan led to their death.

They agreed to tell the church that they only received a lesser amount than they were expecting.

By the end of that day, both Ananias and Sapphira were dead and buried. Why did God treat them so harshly? Was money a sufficient reason to end their life?

God is serious about honesty and integrity. This is as true in our tithes and offerings today as it was for Ananias and Sapphira's sale money. God doesn't force anyone to promise to give a certain amount as offering every month. But once we promise Him, it is clear that God expects us to keep that promise.

But what if we have failed in the past? Let's not continue lying to ourselves and to God. We can be true to our promises anytime, including today.

Ananias and Sapphira refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the people around them. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Ananias and Sapphira's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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JUNE 19, 2021

When the Laodicean church refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from the Laodicean church, who struggled to put God first?

We are told that the church in Laodicean really struggled to put God first. They never rejected God, but God certainly wasn't first in their lives. Jesus called their state lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. Here is the full biblical passage:

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens

the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:14–22).

God is fully aware of our actions and our motives. He knows our failures and our successes. Jesus knows when we pretend to be faithful. He can see through our masks. He knows.

That is why God doesn't reject us. Jesus continues knocking at the door of your heart day after day, week after week, year after year. Once we allow Jesus to come in, putting God first will be easy.

The Laodicean church refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for them and the people around them. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while the Laodicean church's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.



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JUNE 26, 2021

When Lucifer refused to put God First

Putting God first can be difficult. What can we learn from Lucifer, who refused to put God first?

Sometimes we wait until everything is perfect with our finances and our lives before we are faithful in our tithes and offerings. We tell ourselves: "If only the environment was right, I wouldn't struggle to put God first. If I were promoted, if interest rates lower, if I felt closer to God, if, if . . ."

One of the most beautiful and powerful angels lived in the most perfect environment and saw God every day. This perfect setting didn't help him remain faithful, because this is a decision each one of us must make in whatever circumstances we are living through at each moment.

Lucifer became too proud to put God first. His ego was too important for that. Lucifer's needs were more important. He wanted to become his own god. To make his own rules. To get the most out of life, without God interfering with his freedom. Why should God get the best of his worship and his service?

These motives are still at the root of our own difficulty in putting God first in our tithe and offerings. Our ego and our needs always try to get in the way. We think of ourselves and how much more we

may need the money compared to the church. We argue: "God doesn't need this money. The church has enough. I had better use it myself."

On one dimension, this is correct. God and the church aren't desperate for your money. Our giving has less to do with need, much more to do with faithfulness and humility. God is God and we are not. In part, God asks for the tithe for our benefit. Our tithe and offerings are a great antidote to greed and selfishness.

Waiting for the perfect set of circumstances is a sure way to avoid putting God first in our lives. God is calling us to surrender our ego today and allow Him to open the floodgates of heaven in blessings.

Lucifer refused to put God first. The consequences were terrible for him, as well as angels and humans alike. God's love compels us to put His Kingdom first, while Lucifer's example is a warning for us today. As the deacons collect the tithe and offerings, we are challenged to put God first.