

The Quest for Character: Perseverance

Let's turn together to 2 Tim. 4.

In 2008 four female athletes lined up to run the 600 meter final race. Two laps into the race with only one lap remaining, Heather Domiden had just taken the lead when she stumbled and fell. She got up quickly but now she was almost a quarter of a lap behind the other runners with only one lap left to make up the difference. Pouring on the speed, the crowds watched with amazement as Domiden passed one runner after another until just feet from the finish line she caught up to and passed the lead runner to win the race. In the face of such a set back a lot of people would have given up, phoned in the last lap and called it a day, but Domiden didn't give up. She didn't quit. Just the opposite, she tried harder, she gave it all she had. She *persevered*.

We're in a series called *The Quest for Character* and the character quality we're looking at this morning is perseverance. Perseverance is stick-to-it-tiveness. It's hanging in there when things get tough, going the long haul, not giving up, not quitting. The Apostle Paul writes about his own perseverance in a different race:

⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. 2 Tim 4:6-8

Paul knows he's coming to the end of his life and he can say, *I have fought the good fight...I have finished the race...I have kept the faith*. I didn't give up, I didn't quit, I stayed faithful to God's calling to the end. I *persevered*.

I read with sadness last week that well known Christian author and pastor Josh Harris was separating from his wife of 22 years. A few days later, Josh wrote that he didn't consider himself a Christian. By his own admission he was "falling away". I have met Josh during our mutual time in Sovereign Grace and he always impressed me as a humble, caring, and likeable guy and I was very sad to hear of his separation first from his wife and then from his faith.

I have no desire to pile on Josh Harris this morning. Plenty of people are doing that on the Internet. I really only want to pray for Josh and his wife and family, praying that the Good Shepherd brings him back to the flock. But his self-proclaimed departure from the faith did highlight for me the importance of perseverance as a Christian character quality and that's what I want to talk about this morning. As I see it, there are two major categories that it's important to persevere in: persevering in our faith and persevering in everything else in life. I'm going to spend the most time on the first category.

1. Persevering in the faith

Our quest begins with a question this morning: *What does the Bible say about persevering in the faith and about those who walk away from the faith?* Why is it some Bible verses seem to say a Christian can't fall away, and other verses say that some WILL fall away? It's a tough question but let me share three things I believe the Bible says about persevering in the faith.

a. *A genuine faith in Christ will persevere because genuine faith perseveres*

It's built into the nature of genuine, saving faith to persevere. That may sound like circular reasoning but here's an analogy might help us understand. Suppose someone came up to you with a pouch full of what they said were diamonds and they offered to sell them to you at an incredible price. You pour them out on a table and they appear to be beautiful diamonds. But before you pull out your checkbook you decide to do a test. Knowing that diamonds are the hardest known substance on earth, you take a hammer and begin to hammer them as hard as you can. If those diamonds shattered to bits, you wouldn't conclude that diamonds aren't the hardest substance on earth after all. You'd conclude that they weren't real diamonds because it's in the *nature* of a genuine diamond to be harder than hammers. They may have looked like diamonds but the fact that they were destroyed proves they weren't.

The nature of genuine faith is that all the hammer blows and fiery trials of life can't destroy it. Peter puts it this way: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6-7*

Twice he mentions testing as the thing that proves the genuineness of our faith. The *tested* genuineness of our faith – though *tested* by the fire of trials – results in salvation. Saving faith is a gift given by God and the nature of that faith is that testing refines and proves it genuine, testing doesn't destroy it.

Jesus assures us we don't need to live in fear of not making it to the end in John 10:27-29 ²⁷ *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

Jesus said this so that as his sheep we don't need to live in constant fear of not being saved because our faith wasn't strong enough to persevere, to make it to the end. We aren't saved by our perseverance, we are saved by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, poured out for us on the cross. If we believe in Jesus we are his sheep and we have eternal life and no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand. Some people get clever and say we can't be snatched out of His hand but we can jump out of His hand. Jesus says God is greater than all, and that includes us - we can't snatch ourselves out of the Father's hand. The nature of the saving faith God gives us is that it makes it to the end, it perseveres.

But there's a tension because the Bible also says that there will be many who fall away from the faith, especially as we get closer to the last days. The second thing to say is:

b. *Many who confess faith in Christ will fall away*

4 *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared... 1 Tim. 4:1-2*

Speaking of the last days Jesus says, *...many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be*

increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Matt. 24:10-13

You can't "fall away" from something you were never a part of. You can't "depart" from someplace you've never been. There will be people who are deeply a part of the church, who look and sound genuine, who on some level love and believe in Jesus, but will then walk away from Jesus and the church. Think of Judas. For years he looked and sounded like the other 11 disciples. When Jesus said one of them would betray him, the other disciples had no idea who it would be. There was no obvious distinction between Judas and the other disciples but Jesus said of Judas, one of you is a devil. Wow.

These verses tell us there will be intense demonic deception that will shake loose anyone who hasn't really fully accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Anyone who is playing spiritual games. Departing from the faith can be denying Christ or it can be distorting Christ – confessing faith in Jesus but changing who Jesus is according to what they want Jesus to be rather than what the Bible says Jesus is. But what I get from these verses is that it is an aggressive renouncing of the faith – 1 Tim 4 says they will devote themselves to teachings of the devil, and Matt. 24 says they will hate and betray one another. This isn't talking about people who go through a rough patch in their faith or struggle with doubt and fear. This isn't talking about weak Christians this is talking about haters and betrayers of Christ and the church.

One reason why I believe when Jesus says many will fall away he's not talking about genuine believers is because just a few verses later in Matt. 24:24 he says *For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.* There's that intense, demonic deception again, so much so that if it were possible (implying that it's not possible) even the elect would fall away.

John says about those who walk away: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. 2 John 2:19*

When someone walks away from the Lord finally and fully (not just straying, but renouncing or apostasizing the faith) it proves their faith wasn't genuine. They might have been close. They might have been on journey, on the right track. On some level they may have really believed in Jesus. But they wouldn't depart if they were a child of God. So when someone walks away, we should pray for them. Maybe they're a straying sheep. Maybe they never were one of Jesus' sheep. We can't really know, but Jesus knows. Either way, what they need is Jesus, not our condemnation.

But if falling away proves someone's faith wasn't genuine and if genuine believers can't fall away, then what should we do with the warnings in the Bible about falling away? Should we disregard them (cause they're not for us)? Or should we live in fear cause maybe they are for us (and our faith isn't genuine)? We shouldn't disregard them and we shouldn't live in fear. We should do what we should do with all the warnings in the Bible:

c. See the beauty in the warnings about falling away and take them to heart

One thing the warning that many will fall away does is help us not to think that if someone like Josh Harris who wrote books and preached and pastored can fall away, maybe this whole thing isn't true after

all. Just the opposite: the Bible said this would happen. It's sad, but rather than destroy our faith, this warning helps strengthen our faith: it's happening just as the Bible said it would.

And we should take these warnings seriously. True believers don't write off such warnings as irrelevant to our lives. We see the beauty in the warnings and want to do all we can to stay true to Christ, to hold onto Jesus and a pure confession in his finished, perfect work on the cross. If I see a warning sign like: "warning: no swimming. Alligators in water." That sign doesn't scare me, it makes me feel safe. Cause I don't go near the water. On curves on highway bridges there are often signs picturing a truck tipping over. The warning isn't meant to bring despair to truck drivers so they throw up their hands and say "I'm going to die!" No, the truck driver is meant to heed the warning and slow down. If they see the beauty in the warning and take it to heart the warning helps keep them safe.

We are warned to endure, to persevere, to love Jesus, to guard our faith. We shouldn't think, "it's no big deal what I do, it's all up to God anyway." No, we persevere, we hold as fast as we can to Christ, all the while trusting that God is holding us. Our faith isn't in our grip on God, it's in God's grip on us.

All of us can get discouraged and disillusioned at times. Our faith can grow weak. I get it that sometimes other believers can let us down. Churches can let us down. Where there's life there's mess. Where there's people there's junk. But our faith doesn't rest on the perfection of the church, it rests on the perfection of Christ. Walking away means walking away from Jesus. It means rejecting the one who said no one comes to God the Father except through him. It means disassociating yourself from the one name given under name by which man can be saved. It means rejecting the Savior who died to save everyone who believes in him. It means one moment after you die, you will know that you are lost forever.

So let's hear the warning and resolve in our heart to love Jesus and never let anything or anyone steal that love. And know that that resolve is put there by God.

2. Perseverance in life

We need perseverance in faith, but we also need perseverance in life.

*5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ **Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Rom. 5:1-5***

Jesus has justified us – made us righteous in the sight of God – and given us peace with God. That gives us joyful hope that one day we will enter the amazing, brilliant, eternal kingdom of Jesus and it will be home! All because of Jesus! But our joy isn't limited to what will happen on that day. We also have joy today even when we suffer because – listen to this – suffering produces perseverance. There's something about the heat of hard times, the pressure of problems, that produces perseverance.

We don't grow in endurance through ease. We don't learn not to quit when everything's going great. Comfort doesn't teach us much in the way of character. But apply some pressure, have things go wrong,

make it hard to follow Jesus, and God begins to do this work on our hearts teaching us perseverance: "Get up, keep running, don't quit, endure this hardship."

Perseverance comes from those times when suffering, hardship, and trouble press on our souls and it takes everything we have to keep going. Suffering produces perseverance. And perseverance *produces* character. I take that to mean that perseverance isn't just another character quality, it's foundational quality to *all* character qualities. All other character qualities depend on perseverance to exist.

If we give up on love the minute things get tough we don't really have love. If we give up integrity the minute our integrity is tested we really don't have integrity. If we lose our patience the minute someone gets on our nerves, we really don't have patience. Perseverance *produces* character. So when God wants to grow our character, He brings pressure into the situation: someone who is hard to love. Someone who tries our patience. A situation that makes it hard to stand in integrity. Maybe even we fall down, we fail, we stumble. We go through some setback where quitting sounds good, giving up seems right.

Because that's when our character grows. When we get back up and keep going. Shake off the failure, love that annoying person, be honest when it would be easier to lie. Persevere.

God is faithfully working on you and me, making us more like Jesus. Sometimes that means going through a situation that presses on us so much we just want it to be lifted off. We don't feel like we can go on. We think it's too much and we want to quit. In those moments, don't lose sight of the big picture in the intensity of the moment.

- Jesus reconciled you back to God by his precious blood shed on Calvary. You have peace with God. He is with you and He is for you. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
- One day you will come to the end of the race and Jesus will be waiting for you to welcome you into his eternal kingdom.
- Maybe you're experiencing a setback in some area of life. You've stumbled or someone has tripped you. And you feel like throwing in the towel and quitting. Don't!!! Get back up! Keep believing, keep loving, keep forgiving, keep doing right, keep repenting when you mess up. Keep, keep, keep. Run the race, finish the race! That's what matters! It doesn't matter how fast we are off the blocks, or where we are in the middle of the race. What matters is that we break the tape, we finish the race God has given us to run.
- All the while, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith cause he's the one who's empowering us to finish the race and break the tape:

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Heb. 12:1-2