

KNOWING & DOING

C · S · LEWIS INSTITUTE



A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

From the Fall 2015 issue of Knowing & Doing:



Running the Marathon of Faith: *Persevering to Life's End*

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Following Jesus Christ is not a sprint but a marathon. We must persevere in trusting Christ and following Him until we cross the finish line on the day of our death. The sooner we recognize and embrace this fact of kingdom life, the safer and stronger we will be. As Jesus said to His first disciples, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).¹

When the day of Paul’s death was at hand, he could confidently say,

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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. 4:6–7)

Will that be true of you and me? Understanding the challenges we face in following Jesus and how to deal with them will help us persevere, and that is what we will explore in this article.

These challenges can be subsumed under three broad categories: the world, the flesh, and the devil.² We face opposition from those of the world who don’t know God and who oppose His kingdom. We are troubled and tempted by the desires of our old nature, the flesh. And we are targets of the devil, our “adversary,” who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). As this unholy trinity works against us, we encounter persecution, suffering, temptation, trials, and tribulations, just as Jesus did.

The Challenge of Persecution and Suffering

Jesus gives us a glimpse of the importance of perseverance in the parable of the sower. Integrating the parallel accounts in Matthew 13:18–23 and Luke 8:9–15, we get a fuller picture. The “rocky ground” hearer, who received the Word of God with excitement and joy, endured only until he encountered tribulation and persecution, then he fell away. The time of testing revealed that he had no root and thus could not persevere. The “thorny ground” hearer also endured for a time and appeared to be producing fruit, but he was eventually seduced by the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of life, and the desire for other things, and the fruit was choked out; he did not persevere. Only the “good soil” hearer, the one who heard and understood the Word of God and held it fast in an honest and good heart, bore fruit “with perseverance” (Luke 8:15 NASB), demonstrating the presence of genuine spiritual life. The fruit in view is the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in a person’s life and is ethical in character. One lesson we can take away from this parable is that all professing believers will encounter the chal-

lenges and obstacles of the rocky ground and the thorny ground, but being rooted in union with Christ and being grounded in His Word, they remain steadfast, withstand the challenges, and persevere in faith and obedience.

With this overview clear in our minds, we can see many instances of the necessity of perseverance in the Bible. Perhaps the most obvious is Jesus Himself. He was grievously tempted by the devil, rejected by many of the common people, treated with scorn, ridicule, and contempt by the religious establishment, opposed at every turn, eventually arrested, falsely charged by the Jewish leaders, spat upon, humiliated, tortured, and finally crucified. Yet He persevered in faithfulness to God to the end.

When Jesus sent out His disciples on their first missionary outreach, He told them that they would be hated by many and would encounter persecution, suffering, and the possibility of death, but “the one who perseveres to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22). Later, as He taught them about the terrible times leading up to His second coming, Jesus again reminded them that “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). Ancient tradition tells us that all of the eleven original disciples died a martyr’s death, except for John. They persevered in faithfulness to the end.

Paul’s perseverance is inspiring. Soon after Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road, the Lord said to Ananias, whom He sent to minister to Paul, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). And suffer, Paul did. Comparing himself to the false prophets who were trying to mislead the Corinthians, Paul said,

“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day, I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” (2 Cor. 11:23–29)

Paul persevered in faithfulness up to the day, when, as Eusebius says, he was beheaded on the Ostian Way, outside of Rome.

We might be tempted to say, “Well, that was Jesus and Paul; we can hardly be expected to persevere under such difficult circumstances.” But perseverance is not simply a unique characteristic of Jesus and Paul. The leaders of the early church urged the believers to endure under trial. When Barnabas came to Antioch in Syria, “and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord *with steadfast purpose*” (Acts 11:23). After Paul preached to the Jews at the other Antioch, in Pisidia, we read that “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to *continue in the grace of God*” (Acts 13:43). In the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, where they had previously made many disciples, we find Paul and Barnabas making a return visit and “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to *continue in the faith* and saying that *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22). These and many others were urged to persevere.

Talk of persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ may sound strange to modern American ears. But it is raging in various parts of the world today. Researchers say that during the twentieth century, more people were killed for their faith in Christ than in all the centuries since the time of Christ combined. In our own history, there has been little or no persecution of believers for faith in Christ. But times are changing in America. The tide has turned. Signs of persecution are on the horizon.



The Challenge of False Teaching and Deception

Persecution and suffering are not the only challenges that face followers of Jesus. False teaching was a major concern for the early church. Paul had to confront it in Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, and Thessalonica. Paul warned the Corinthians about “false apostles,” saying they were “deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:13–15). A theologically orthodox friend of mine who attended a liberal seminary told me that one day he arrived at his preaching class to find the blackboard emblazoned with the words “Be sneaky.” The professor explained that the soon-to-be pastors needed to introduce liberal theology into their churches in a way that wasn’t obvious, so the people didn’t revolt. As an old man, the apostle John also had to confront false teaching of an early gnostic type in his congregation. The heretics finally left the church, but not without leaving behind poisonous ideas about the nature of Christ that John had to combat.³ False teaching is no less a problem today. There is arguably more false teaching confronting the church today than at any time in history.

The Challenge of Spiritual Warfare

Yet another challenge is what Paul describes as “the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). He laid out an important, valuable set of instructions about how to withstand demonic schemes of seduction and outright attack (Eph. 6:10–20). Peter also warned his churches about this very real danger (1 Pet. 5:8–11), as did James, who gave the encouraging exhortation to “resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). The schemes of the devil can take any number of forms, too many to enumerate here. Our best defense is to follow Paul’s advice to put on the full armor of God and remain alert.

The Challenge of Daily Temptations

The most common challenge we face in following Jesus is daily temptations to the particular sins that appeal to the inclinations and passions of our old fallen nature, which Paul calls “the flesh.” Paul describes the experience of every true Christian when he says “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). Do you find a struggle raging in your heart as you are tempted to sin and then seek to resist? If so, that is a good sign, an indication that God’s Spirit is at work in you. The path to victory, says Paul, is to “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). This means saying no to the sinful desires that tempt us and yes to the Spirit’s prompting to obedience.

Some people have been defeated so often that they have given up hope of gaining victory over the sinful temptations that assail them. This is a great mistake and an unnecessary capitulation to sin. It is also a great danger, for it makes them vulnerable to the hardening effects of sin in their hearts, which can lead to gradually drifting from faith in Christ. They need to understand the Bible’s teaching on how to deal with remaining sin by putting to death the deeds of the body by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). We are not the helpless victims of our sinful desires and temptations, even though it may sometimes seem that way. Paul assures us that “no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Through learning constant reliance on the empowering presence of the Spirit, we can resist the fleshly temptations that assail us. In some cases we may need the wise counsel and prayers of a godly pastor or elder or an accountability group.

The Spiritual Benefit of Challenges

So far, following Jesus has sounded like a life of unmitigated misery. Is there any good news? Anything positive or encouraging? The answer is yes. The first thing to say—and to be thankful for—is that normally our daily life is not besieged by all of these challenges at once! Although we can expect to encounter temptations to sin on

a daily basis, things like persecution, suffering, false teaching, and demonic attack tend to come and go. They intensify at certain seasons, then recede, unless we are living in an especially hostile, anti-Christian environment or period of time.

But the most encouraging news is that God uses the challenges we experience for our good. They play an important role in our transformation into the image of Christ. Paul says, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 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. 5:3–5). Paul is telling us that suffering actually strengthens our endurance and ability to persevere, and lays the foundation for the increase of other virtues.

James takes it a step further when he says, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness [i.e., perseverance]. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4). We are to rejoice in trials, says James, because they produce perseverance, which helps move us on to maturity.

Peter, likewise, commends the value of trials and testing: “You have been grieved by various trials, 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 Pet. 1:6–9). Trials serve to purify our faith and make us stronger and more Christlike. And they will also bring us praise, glory, and honor when Christ returns, as well as glorifying Him who enabled us to persevere.

Towering over all the difficult experiences of life is the unshakable truth that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This doesn’t mean that everything will somehow turn out to be good from a human point of view. Rather, it means that God will use all the difficult things we encounter as part of His process of conforming us to the image of His Son, which is the ultimate good (Rom. 8:29).



The Necessity of Perseverance

We have looked at a number of passages that urge us to endure in faith and to overcome the many and varied obstacles we encounter as we seek to faithfully follow Jesus Christ to our life’s end. It remains to state explicitly what has been implicit up to this point: Only those who continue to trust and follow Christ to the end will ultimately be saved. As Paul said to the Colossians who were in danger of being led astray by false teachers,

You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel you heard. (Col. 1:21–23)

The writer to the Hebrews said the same thing to Jewish believers who were tempted to return to Judaism,

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb. 3:12–14)

Do these passages (and others like them) mean that a true Christian can lose his salvation if he does not persevere to the end? God gives strong assurances of His unchanging love and His almighty power to keep and preserve His true children unto salvation. But a vital part of how He does so is to warn soberly all professing believers of the tragic consequences of giving up faith in Christ and to urge us to persevere. Such warnings are meant to be taken very seriously and to be heeded, because some who profess Christ actually do forsake Him. Arminians would say that such people were true Christians who lost their faith. Calvinists would say they were never true believers, whose lack of saving faith is seen in their turning away from Christ. But both would agree that such people will not be saved. The true believer will take God's warnings seriously and will earnestly seek His grace and power to be obedient and faithful in the midst of the trial and temptations of life, and will never forsake Jesus. The true believer will faithfully use the means God has given for growing in grace⁴ and will heed the words of Peter to make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. (2 Pet. 1:5–10)

Will We Persevere to the End?

The question that faces each of us is, Will I persevere to my life's end? I know how weak I am, and how prone to sin. Will I really make it to heaven?

The words of Jesus give great encouragement and assurance:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out . . . And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37, 39)

Later on, Jesus said,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 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. (John 10:27–29)

These promises apply to those who have come to saving faith in Jesus. Such people are recognized by the fact that they persevere in trusting and following Jesus, who said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". (John 8:31–32)

Paul's words to the Philippians also give much encouragement to those who know Christ: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ". (Phil. 1:6)

Finally, Paul marvels at God's grace and exclaims,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is

written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31–39)

Yes, we must persevere to life's end; there is no other option. But even more important is the fact that the God of grace is persevering with us. He is enabling us to persevere and ensuring that no matter what comes against us, we will not be lost, but will make it home at last.

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, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2) ❖

[Senior devil Screwtape to junior devil] The long, dull, monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity or middle-aged adversity are excellent campaigning weather. You see, it is so hard for these creatures to persevere.

C.S. Lewis

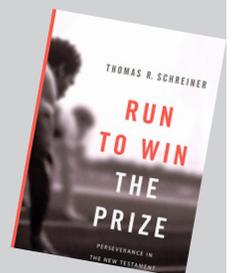


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RECOMMENDED READING

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize: Perseverance in the New Testament* (Crossway, 2010)

Scripture's commands to persevere, and warnings of the consequences if we fail, have been met with apathy by some, and led others to doubt the state of their salvation. Thomas Schreiner once again tackles this difficult topic in *Run to Win the Prize*. Clarifying misunderstandings stemming from his more detailed treatment in *The Race Set Before Us* (IVP 2001), Schreiner draws together an illuminating overview of biblical teaching on the doctrine of perseverance.



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