

Reasons for Perseverance (1)

9 But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. 10 For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. 11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Heb. 6:9-12)

I came to faith when I was nine years old, after hearing the Gospel in a Bible program. From that time, I was in Sunday School, and then a youth group in my teens. I was part of a young adult group out of school. Now in those years, there were a lot of invitations to accept Christ. And I can tell you that in my Sunday School class, in an Awana group of over 100, a youth group of over 50, and a young adult group of at least twenty, everyone had prayed to accept Christ.

But as we went through the various grades at school, different ones dropped off. Others would come, and then they would drop off. And by drop off, I don't mean they began attending another church. I mean they simply stopped going to any church. Today, out of what in the end must have been a few hundred people, probably five people are still serving the Lord. Virtually no one out of that group has persevered in the faith.

Now there are three possible explanations for that.

The first is that they were mostly all saved, but at some point, lost their salvation.

The second is that they were mostly all saved, and are still saved, but there is simply zero fruit, and hasn't been any fruit for years.

The third is that the faith they had was a man-made, earthly faith, that could only last a few winters before it shrivelled up.

Which of those explanations sounds most likely to you? The first is the most unlikely. Scripture never describes eternal life dying in a person. And as we found out in Hebrews 6, if that were hypothetically possible, then according to Hebrews 6 all those few hundred can never be saved again, and their doom is certain irremediable.

The second explanation is almost equally unlikely. A Christian may have seasons of unfruitfulness, periods of stunted growth, before God's chastening and conviction brings him out of it. But if you have a tree in your garden that has been dull brown and leafless for ten years, you should probably stop watering it and just admit that it is as dead as the wooden door to your home.

The third explanation finds biblical support. Man-made, earthly, selfish faith does not last because its object is not the life-giving Christ, but something else, like their own safety, their own comfort, their own desires. Earthly faith eventually drifts, doubts, and becomes dull to the things of God. But true faith perseveres.

That's the major theme of the whole book of Hebrews: remaining faithful to the Finisher of the faith. And one of the threats to that faithfulness is a kind of sluggish laziness. You remember that the writer has been talking to his readers about a kind of dullness and sluggishness that some of them had. That dullness may be benign, and it may be malignant. The benign form is laziness in a true believer that needs to be repented of. The malignant form is laziness in a false believer, that eventually leads to denying the Gospel. One is a true believer who is in a bad patch and now needs to shake off sloth. The other is an almost Christian, whose prolonged spiritual apathy eventually leads to full apostasy: denying the Lord after once having claimed him.

Remember, in Scripture apostates are simply unbelievers claiming to be one of God's people while denying the Gospel. Unbelievers, apostates, still need to be saved. And saved people, according to this very book, do not deny the faith.

But having taught us both truths that apostates are not saved, and the saved do not apostatise, he now brought them together and said, “And if you still entertaining the idea of dabbling in both faith and unbelief, and want to imagine what would happen if we could mix the two, the answer is you'd need a second crucifixion.” Since that's impossible, he says, let no man turn back. Let no one who has come to some understanding of Christ now take that knowledge lightly and turn to the world. Wherever you are: true believer, or not, it is a fearful thing to treat the truths of the Gospel lightly. Truth responded to rightly, with diligence endurance will melt and soften your heart. Truth responded to wrongly, with dull sluggishness will harden your heart.

And the remedy for this slothfulness, this spiritual sluggishness is the idea of Christian perseverance. Many Christians from Cassian in the 4th century, through to the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards have recognised something that is called “healing by contraries”. When you have a sinful inclination one way, you oppose that thing with a godly inclination in the opposite way. The thief is cured not simply by stopping his stealing, but by cultivating giving. The angry man is changed not simply by stopping anger, but by practising gratitude. And this is what we see in Hebrews. We deal with drawing back by drawing near. We deal with casting away our confidence by holding fast. We deal with this slothful fading out with diligently persevering in our faith.

This passage is about persevering, enduring, continuing on. Homing in on just the four verses 9-12, we can understand why perseverance is crucial, what it is, how to obtain it. As I think back on those people, I think about perseverance. As you sit here today, I feel what the writer says, desiring that each one of you would show the same diligence to remain faithful to the end. This passage will show us why that matters, what it means, and how to do it.

I. The Momentousness of Christian Perseverance

9 But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner.

From a terrifying warning, the writer moves to a warm and gentle encouragement. In fact, this is the only time in the book he uses the word *beloved*. He has now turned from the hypothetical to the actual. And to his actual readers, he assures them: I don't think verses 4 through 8 are true of you. I am persuaded, convinced of better things concerning you. You are not those that fall away. You are not those whose dullness eventually causes them to disown the faith.

You are neither the unsaved, nor are you part of that hypothetical group of saved apostates. Later, he will say this, **Heb 10:39** But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

In fact, he tells us he is convinced that better things accompany salvation in general. In other words, falling away does not accompany true salvation. The fruits that accompany salvation are not the thistles, thorns and briars of unbelief and falling away. No, it is the good fruit of perseverance.

That's what makes it so important. Perseverance is the mark of true faith. See, don't get this backwards. It is not that there is this vague generic stuff called faith, and in some people it lasts, and in other people it dies. No. What Scripture teaches is that when you truly close with the living Christ in saving faith, that faith is Spirit-generated. The bond that is made between Christ and believer is a bond of life. We are His body, and He is our head. That is a bond where the each needs the other. Now I understand God does not need us. But the biblical metaphor of head and body is showing us that our union with Christ is an immersive, indissoluble union of joined lives.

The faith that accompanies salvation is permanent because it is God's investment in His own body.

Remember that Paul tells us this in Ephesians 5

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

Because false faith does not unite with Christ, it has no work of God to sustain it. It is self-generated, and will finally drift away.

And the writer says, beloved, I know this is not the case with you, because I think you are truly saved, and the fruit that accompanies true salvation will be seen in you. So “even though we speak this way”, it is to lovingly caution the converted, and to firmly warn the complacent. Chrysostom said “It is better that I should scare you with words, than that you should sorrow in deeds.”

But it is a momentous thing to have faith that endures. It means there is a supernatural bond between you and your Creator.

What is that going to look like? Is Christian perseverance that you claim you're a Christian all your life? Is it that you keep going to church all your life?

II. The Meaning of Christian Perseverance

10 For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. 11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Here is perseverance described for us in three parts.

First, it is a continual labour of love for God. “Your work and labour of love that you have shown towards His name”. Christian perseverance is partly an ongoing work of loving God, pleasing Him. It is love for His name, for His glory. The word *labour* actually means troublesome toil. This is not love that comes upon you like goosebumps in winter, or like pins and needles from sitting too long. This is love that is deliberate toil, intentional acts, directed efforts.

Second, Christian perseverance manifests this love by serving the saints. The writer describes their labour of love by saying “in that you have ministered to the saints and do minister”. Both past tense and present tense. You have served believers, and still do. This is the verb form of *deacon*. You are waiting upon others, helping, blessing, exhorting, teaching, counselling, visiting, giving, assisting.

From time to time you will come across the man who tells you he doesn't need church. He gets what he needs from online sermons. He reads his own Bible. He prays. But here we read that such a man's love for God is a fiction. You show love for God when you love what He loves. And God loves His people. The way you show love to His name is by serving the saints.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (1 Jn. 4:20)

1Jo 3:14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

We remember in Matthew Jesus speaks to the sheep and the goats. The sheep He rewards and tells them that they fed Him and clothed Him and visited Him when sick or in prison, and clothed Him. The goats He curses and says they refused to feed Him and clothe Him or visit Him when sick or in prison. Both groups ask when they did such things. And His reply is, inasmuch you did or didn't do

it to these My brethren, you did or didn't do it to Me. Jesus so identifies with His people that loving God and loving His church are indistinguishable.

So the good fruits that are accompanying his readers are that they love God, and show that by loving God's people. And now he shows them the third aspect of this perseverance.

11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end,

Third, Christian perseverance diligently continues until our hope becomes a full completed assurance at the end. In other words, one day, when you cross the finish line, hope becomes sight, what you trusted would happen now happens. You continue until what is unseen is finally seen. The kind of labour and toil they've shown, the writer say, the same diligence must go on until He comes or until you go to Him.

It must not, verse 12 become sluggish. That's the same word from 5:11: dullness, laziness, slothfulness. Instead, it is a labour that keeps going, a love for God's name that survives trials, hardships, insults, calamities, attacks, loss. It's a love for God's people that survives disappointments, conflict, division, slander, dissension, betrayals.

So here is a one sentence definition of Christian perseverance: *you keep diligently loving God by loving His people until your faith becomes sight*. That's what accompanies true salvation. It's momentous to have it.

I think you can tell why. What kind of love can keep loving Him whom we have not seen, even when we suffer for Him, and experience increased hardship, and experience alienation in this world, and persecution, and hatred from loved ones? A love that has been put into your heart, that's what. What kind of love can keep loving people from whom you expect the best, but will sometimes receive the worst, who will often disappoint in ways unbelievers won't, who will seem to have worse flaws, who will seem socially awkward and just not easy to click with? A love that has been put into your heart: the things that accompany salvation.

Persevering love for God and love for His people: that's the fruit of true faith.

Let me make a side-observation here about his use of the words: we desire each one of you.

Each one. This writer is not speaking to faceless crowd, a shapeless mass of bodies. Each individual is valued and important. Like Christ, He does not want to lose one out of the ninety-nine. In Scripture, God says to Moses, I know you by name. In the Bible God delights to give us long lists of names; names which seem meaningless to us until we zoom out and see that this shows God knows and loves individuals.

Church is not meant to be a crowd of bodies in which you can hide. The church is supposed to be a place where you can known by name, where someone knows you, disciples you, can care for you, and can pray that you would be among the each one who has Christian perseverance. Maybe there is something in you that likes the idea of hiding in the crowd, slipping out after church as if your car is on fire. But God wants you to know and be known. He would have you be noticed, and known, and exhorted one on one to remain faithful.

And actually, unless you treat church as a place where each one is to be valued, you probably won't do much of the ministering to the saints.

But how do we love God, by loving His people, diligently, until our hope becomes full assurance? One part of the answer we've already given: if you are in Christ, you are bonded to Him, His faith is your faith, His love is your love, and it can no more fail than the God-Man could stop trusting His Father.

But the second part of the answer has to do with our responses. God has ordained that our human responses are the means by which His sovereign grace works in and through. So the writer now gives us the motives for persevering in love for God and His people.

III. The Motives for Christian Perseverance

10 For God *is* not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, *in that* you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

Two motives for perseverance are in this passage.

The first is here in verse 10. Simply reflecting on God's reward of our perseverance is a motive to continue. Perseverance comes through reflection on His reward.

God is not unrighteous or unfair to forget your labour of love. What does this mean? The idea of forget here does not mean accidentally lose a memory. God is not subject to such weakness. It has the idea of overlooking, neglecting, dismissing, treating as nothing.

Were God to see the diligent labours of His people, their toil in serving God by serving people, the sacrifice and the pain, the loss and the inconvenience, were He to see that and ignore it, Scripture says He would be unjust, unfair.

Yes, indeed, we are rebels who deserve the incarceration of eternal fire. Yes, we can make no demands on God or expect anything from Him. And yes, in heaven we see believers throwing their crowns at His feet, understanding that everything was from Him and through Him and to Him.

But with all that in place, God is still the very essence of kindness and generosity. He is quick to mark the slightest effort to please Him. And while He is very difficult to satisfy, He is extraordinarily easy to please. Such a God is not an exacting auditor, who will remind us on judgement day that everything we had was on loan anyway, that He owes us nothing, and that we ought to be grateful to have escaped Hell by the skin of our teeth.

No, while all that may be true in a judicial sense, we read that God takes special joy in rewarding His imperfect children.

We know something of this. When our dogs return a ball, dripping with dog-drool, with their tails wagging and their pink mouths panting, we tell them what good boys they were. When our babies return nothing more than a gummy smile to us, we rejoice and tell them how good they are. When our children bring us their scribble art-work, where the people don't have torsos, but have legs and arms coming from their heads, we congratulate them, and stick their drawings up.

We don't gain anything from dog-dribbled balls, or gummy smiles or wax-crayon stick-figures. But our love leads us to reward our beloved. God does not gain anything from the service of His people, but He delights to receive it.

God is not miserly in His loving reward of His children. Yes, every effort we made came from Him, but He will not forget the smallest thing done for Him, for His people. So small, Jesus said that

Mat 10:42 "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

So small, Jesus said that something done for the most insignificant, forgotten member of the church will not be forgotten.

Mat 25:40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.

Here is how you keep persevering. You remember, God sees, and has perfect recall. He knows all my sins, but has forgiven all of them in Jesus and chooses not to remember them. So what's left? Every truly pure good work you do for Him. He won't miss it, overlook it, think it of little import.

In fact, this is why Jesus told us to practise secret religion: praying privately, fasting without a show, giving anonymously, so that we learn the deep power of the Father's reward. Not man's applause, not promotion in the church, not position, not influence, not power, but the profound sense that I am working for God, and He sees.

When you are feeling the discouragement of your own heart, or the sluggishness of the flesh, and you desire to draw back, to love less, to serve less, then this is the promise you must cling to: God will not fail to reward every true effort made for Him. It is worth every plodding step. It is worth every evil thing denied, every sacrifice made, every cost embraced.

But there is a second motive given here. Not only does perseverance come through reflection on His reward, but it comes also through imitation of the inheritors.

12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises

Instead of becoming slothful and dull and lazy, we must imitate some people. Whom do we imitate? Those who have practised endurance, and have entered into the promises of God. Those who have kept the faith, been faithful, faith plus patience, and now they have experienced what they hoped for.

This is largely what chapter 11 is going to be about. The writer wants us to know that there is a massive stadium full of finishers. Each one of them is living proof - and I use the word living intentionally - that you can finish. It is possible. When you know people have endured and not given up under the most extreme persecution, you say, we can do this. We can keep loving God by loving His people. No going back for me, no dullness for me.

I remember watching the Comrades Marathon as a boy during the days of Bruce Fordyce. And in the Comrades Marathon, the race always finishes in a stadium. Now I can't imagine the pain on running 90 kilometres, but evidently a lot of people do so intentionally. And as the day goes on, people finish at different times, and they have cutoff times for gold, silver, bronze medals, and a final cutoff for no medal at all. But I imagine one of the things that keeps runners going is the thought of how many there are ahead of them who have kept going, who have made it into the stadium.

If the runners were running and finding the streets covered with comatose runners, fainted bodies just littering the road everywhere, with a deathly silent stadium ahead of them, I think a good bit of despair would enter into many hearts. What chance do I have if everyone is dropping out? But to approach that stadium, and to hear cheers and to know that people are finishing and getting their

reward keeps you running. You imitate them.

So Scripture says, we don't slow down. We remember that we are surrounded with a cloud, or a crowd of witnesses, people who have finished, who being dead yet speak, and say, "It can be done. By grace it will be done. So put your head down, and keep going."

As I think back on my Sunday School, my youth group, faces flash before me of people who never truly closed with Christ. My prayer is that none of your faces would be added to that number. Pray for me, that I would not be added to your number of professed but never possessed.

How do we do that?

We remember our reward. We imitate the inheritors. That's how we keep diligently loving God by loving His people until the very end. That's the good fruit that accompanies true salvation.