

RUN TO WIN THE PRIZE

PERSEVERANCE IN
THE NEW TESTAMENT

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

 **CROSSWAY**

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Run to Win the Prize

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EXHORTATIONS TO PERSEVERE

Let me begin with two stories to illustrate the concerns of this book. Years ago a young woman and her husband came to a Bible study I was leading. Two days after the Bible study they visited our house for dinner, and she expressed a keen desire to become a Christian. I was hesitant because she knew so little about the Christian faith. Nevertheless, I concluded that I might be resisting the Holy Spirit, and one thing led to another, and she confessed Jesus as her Savior that night in our living room. I assured her after her confession of faith that she was securely saved forever, that nothing she did could remove her from the eternal life that was hers. Her husband shortly thereafter followed her in the same faith. They both grew rapidly in the faith during the next year, and we were regularly involved in Bible studies with them. But a year after her confession of faith, she changed dramatically. She decided to divorce her husband, quit attending church, and ceased going to Bible studies. I pleaded with her to at least go to counseling, but to no avail. All of this happened many years ago, and I have since lost all contact with her, though I know there was no change of mind or repentance in the next fifteen years.

The other story also relates to a friend who prayed with me to become a believer. I saw the radiance and joy in her life. She began to grow in remarkable ways. And yet in a year or two the

early bloom of her faith began to fade. She began to get drunk on a fairly regular basis. She ended up living with a person who was an adherent of Buddhism. On one occasion I said to her, “By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). A number of years passed. She broke off the relationship with the first man and ended up getting married to another. Still no desire for the things of God and Jesus Christ manifested itself. And yet, after a few years of marriage, a change began to take place. Her desire to follow the Lord resurfaced, and she began to read Scripture, pray, and take her church involvement seriously. Once again she began to talk to me about spiritual matters. She gave every indication that she belonged to Jesus Christ and that she loved him. A significant period of time had intervened between her first confession of faith and the return to her first love. Was her first experience a sham, so that she was truly saved the second time? Or did she lose her salvation and regain it later? Or was she a believer the entire time, with a temporary lapse in her faith and obedience?

In this book I intend to offer some advice as to what we should say in the situations I have described above. But I am not only speaking to these particular situations, for the argument of this book is that all believers everywhere need the warnings and admonitions of Scripture.

WHAT DO WE SAY TO NEW CHRISTIANS?

In the first story I related above, I told the new believer that she was saved no matter what she did. Is this a proper way to speak to new believers? When we look at the NT, what did the apostles and early Christian teachers say to new believers? Surely their words function as paradigms and models for us. When Barnabas arrived in Syrian Antioch, after hearing that many Gentiles in Antioch had embraced the gospel and turned to the Lord, he responded with joy. “When he [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faith-

ful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11:23). Barnabas recognized that the conversion of the Gentiles in Antioch was a work of God’s grace and could not be finally attributed to human agency. Still, a focus on God’s grace does not preclude the need for warnings and admonitions but is the foundation for calling upon believers to persevere. Barnabas summoned his hearers to remain and persevere (*prosmenein*) in their relationship with the Lord. Indeed, they were to do so “with steadfast purpose.” The focus is on the commitment required of these new believers.

A similar scenario played out when Paul and Barnabas evangelized in Pisidian Antioch. Once again a number of people responded positively to the proclamation of the gospel. What advice did Paul and Barnabas give to these new converts? “And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, 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). Two parallels to Acts 11:23 stand out. First, the new believers are “urged” to persevere. In Acts 11:23 the verb “exhorted” (*parakalein*) is used, whereas here we find the word “persuade” (*peithein*), translated “urged” by the ESV. In both instances, the seriousness of the admonition is underscored by the verb, showing that vigilance is mandated for new believers. Second, the same verb used in Acts 11:23 is repeated. Believers are “to continue [*prosmenein*] in the grace of God.” The ongoing commitment of believers to their newfound faith is emphasized. Third, both texts refer to God’s grace. Believers are not exhorted to trust in themselves or to continue in the faith by virtue of their own efforts. They are to continue the Christian life in the same manner they began it: by the faith given to them by God’s grace. Hence, the perseverance called for here should not be understood as works-righteousness. Instead it is nothing other than a continual reliance upon the grace of God. We are reminded of what Paul taught in Galatians 3:3. We continue in the Christian life the same way we began, for we do not initiate the Christian life in the Spirit and then progress in it by means of the flesh.

At the conclusion of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13–14), they revisited the cities in which they had planted churches. The instruction given to such new converts, which Luke records in a compact manner (Acts 14:22–23), is surely significant. Besides appointing elders and praying for them, we are told that they strengthened the new disciples by “encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). We receive insight here into why these new believers were exhorted “to continue” (*emmenein*) in their recently confessed faith, for entrance into the kingdom will be preceded by many difficulties and sufferings. Such “tribulations” may deflect believers from continuing in the faith they embraced, enticing them to a life that promises comfort and relief. A pattern is evident in the exhortations given to new believers, especially when we recognize the brevity of what Luke includes in his account. Recent Christians are not told that they will inherit the kingdom no matter what they do. Rather, they are urged to remain and continue in the faith.

Another window into what the apostles and early Christian leaders taught new believers is provided by 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5. What Paul teaches here accords with what Luke includes in the text we just examined (Acts 14:22–23), for the tribulations encountered by the Thessalonians raised concerns about whether they continued to believe. Paul sent Timothy to the newly established Thessalonian church, for he knew they were disturbed by the trials and difficulties that they had experienced since their conversion. In verse 5 Paul explains why he sent Timothy: “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” Paul was worried that the Thessalonians had abandoned their faith in Christ because of the intensity of persecution. Satan, he feared, had subverted their faith, and his “labor” in planting the church would have been

wasted if the Thessalonians had forsaken their faith. Paul did not assume that the Thessalonians were truly believers merely because they had embraced the faith when he first preached to them. The authenticity of their faith manifested itself in their response to trials, so that their persistence in faith demonstrated that their faith was genuine.

Other texts could be included at this point, but no attempt is made here to be comprehensive. What I hope is clear is that new believers were regularly instructed after their conversion about the need to persevere in the faith.

WHAT DO WE SAY TO EXPERIENCED CHRISTIANS?

We have seen above that recent converts are exhorted to continue in the faith, but such an exhortation is not limited to new believers. The exhortation to persevere until the end is a staple of NT teaching. It is part of the warp and woof of NT exhortation. For example, Peter sums up his entire letter in 1 Peter 5:12,¹ remarking that he has declared to them “the true grace of God.” Then follows the admonition addressed to churches facing persecution: “Stand firm in it.” In other words, they are to stand fast in God’s grace in the midst of their troubles. The devil is on the prowl, attempting “to devour” and destroy believers (1 Pet. 5:8). And the devil aims to shatter the faith of believers by inducing them to commit apostasy.² Believers will not commit apostasy and fall away if they “resist” the devil by being “firm in [their] faith” (1 Pet. 5:9). Peter does not exhort the readers to do something unusual or surprising at the onset of persecution. Rather, they are to continue trusting in God for strength to face the pressures and persecution that afflict them. Some of the same themes considered earlier appear again here. Believers in the Petrine churches may be

¹E. R. Wendland argues that the aim of the entire letter is summed up here. See “Stand Fast in the True Grace of God! A Study of 1 Peter,” *JOTT* 13 (2000): 25–26.

²See Leonard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn; trans. J. E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 361; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, *Thornapple Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 210.

tempted to disown Christ because of the intensity of persecution. Hence Peter admonishes them to remain vigilant and faithful.

Similarly, Jude commands believers to “keep [themselves] in the love of God” (Jude 21), responding to a situation in which false teachers had slipped into the church undercover and were promoting destructive teachings and licentious behavior. In the context of Jude, keeping themselves in God’s love functions as the opposite of apostasy. Either believers remain in God’s love, or they fall away from the faith and follow the lifestyle and teachings of the interlopers. No other option exists. Jude does not merely give helpful advice on growth in the Christian life. Keeping oneself in the love of God is essential for receiving eternal life on the final day.³

The need to persevere also appears in Hebrews, and indeed the call to continue in the faith informs the entire letter. Hence many texts could be selected from the letter in support of what is argued for here. Here I cite only one verse: “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God” (Heb. 12:15). Such failure cannot be restricted merely to a lack of vitality or fruitfulness in the Christian life, for the author immediately considers the case of Esau (vv. 16–17) as an example of someone who repudiated the blessings he enjoyed.⁴ To fall short of God’s grace, then, is another way of describing apostasy—irrevocable separation from God. A very similar command is directed to the Corinthians in

³See here the remarks of Jonathan Edwards about perseverance: “’Tis necessary to salvation as a necessary consequence and evidence of a title to salvation. There never is a title to salvation without it. Though it have not the righteousness by which a title to life is attained, yet none have that righteousness that don’t persevere; and that because although it is not proper to say that perseverance is necessary in order to justification, yet a persevering principle is necessary in order to justification. ’Tis necessary that a man should believe in Christ, and cleave to Christ in a persevering way: a temporary faith don’t justify. But in order to that, persons must have that faith that is of a persevering, everlasting sort. He must have that sort of seed that is an abiding seed. ’Tis not a vanishing but a durable faith that justifies.” “Persevering Faith,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, M. X. Lesser (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 19: 600–601.

⁴Rightly, Grant R. Osborne, “A Classical Arminian View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 123; Gareth Lee Cockerill, “A Wesleyan Arminian View,” in Bateman, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 285–286. Against, Randall C. Gleason, “A Moderate Reformed View,” in Bateman, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 169.

Paul's second letter. They are "not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor. 6:1). We can be quite sure that final salvation is in view here. First, the word "vain" (*kenos*) in Paul is regularly associated with final judgment and destruction (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10, 14, 58; Gal. 2:2; Eph. 5:6; Phil. 2:16; Col. 2:8; 1 Thess. 2:1; 3:5). Second, I would nuance what Edwards says a bit differently, but he rightly sees that persevering faith is required for final salvation. In context, the Corinthians are exhorted to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20), which is defined in terms of the forgiveness of sins (2 Cor. 5:19). Indeed, in 2 Corinthians 6:2 Paul immediately follows up the need "not to receive the grace of God in vain" with the claim that "now is the day of salvation." Hence there are good reasons to think that the exhortation relates to final salvation. In both Hebrews 12:15 and 2 Corinthians 6:1, readers are implored to continue to respond to God's grace in order to obtain the final reward on the last day.⁵

I conclude this initial foray by considering Philippians 2:16. Believers must "[hold] fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." Believers are exhorted to hold fast the gospel they initially embraced until the day of Christ. The general nature of the command suggests that the admonition to persevere applies to all believers, and thus the exhortation here cannot be limited to the Philippian situation. Some scholars maintain, however, that the participle "holding fast" (*epechontes*) should be translated "holding forth" instead of "holding fast." In other words, the verse relates to evangelism instead of perseverance.⁶ Vern Poythress

⁵Calvin himself also believed perseverance was necessary for final salvation. "Still, our redemption would be imperfect if he did not lead us ever onward to the final goal of salvation. Accordingly, the moment we turn away even slightly from him, our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishes away. As a result, all those who do not repose in him voluntarily deprive themselves of all grace." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.16.1. Even though Calvin here rightly emphasizes the need to persevere, he does not express the idea well, and his words could be understood to demand a kind of perfection that would undermine assurance.

⁶Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 74–77.

has argued that we cannot exclude either meaning, with the result that the term includes both the idea of evangelism and perseverance.⁷ Poythress may be correct in arguing that both meanings are in view. I want to defend here the idea that perseverance is also in view. First, twice Paul speaks of working “in vain” in the verse. As noted previously, the idea of a vain or futile ministry occurs when Paul considers the possibility of believers not continuing in the faith.⁸ Second, the warning against grumbling and complaining (Phil. 2:14) harks back to the OT and the grumbling of the wilderness generation (Exod. 16:7–9, 12; Num. 17:5, 10) and their failure to enter the promised land.⁹ The land promise in Exodus becomes a type of the future inheritance in Paul,¹⁰ and hence a connection is forged between Israel’s failure to enter the land of promise and the warning directed to believers.¹¹

Third, the words “blameless,” “innocent,” and “without blemish” are in the same semantic range and are used elsewhere in Paul to denote the godly character needed to obtain the final reward.¹² Fourth, the expression “that you may be . . . children of God” (Phil. 2:15) has an eschatological reference, designating the truth that those who continue to believe will be God’s children on the day of Christ. Such an interpretation is confirmed

⁷Vern Sheridan Poythress, “‘Hold Fast’ Versus ‘Hold Out’ in Philippians 2:16,” WTJ 63 (2002): 45–53.

⁸See also 1 Cor. 15:2; Gal. 3:4; 4:11, where the same notion is expressed with the word “vain” (*eikē*).

⁹Phil. 2:14 is the first verse of a long sentence that concludes with v. 16. Hence it is vital in considering the meaning of v. 16.

¹⁰A difficult question is whether Israel in the wilderness or Esau are considered to be damned. There may be a one-to-one correspondence between the OT and the NT, so that the wilderness generation and Esau are damned and the same threat is held out against those who commit apostasy in the NT. On the other hand, it is also possible that the earthly punishments inflicted upon the wilderness generation and Esau now correspond to eternal punishment in the NT. In this latter view, there is an escalation between the type and the fulfillment. For the purposes of our discussion here, there is no need to resolve this matter. What is imperative is to see that those who fall away in the NT are threatened with eternal damnation.

¹¹For a study on inheritance in the OT, Jewish tradition, and the NT, see James D. Hester, *Paul’s Concept of Inheritance: A Contribution to the Understanding of Heilsgeschichte*, SJT Occasional Papers 14 (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968). Hester remarks that Paul does not restrict the promise to the land of Canaan but widens it to include the entire world, and such a universal inheritance is tied to the work of Christ (77–78).

¹²For “blameless,” see 1 Thess. 3:13. For “without blemish,” see Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Col. 1:22.

by the allusion to Deuteronomy 32:5, which again considers the rebellion of Israel: “They [Israel] have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation.” Notice that Israel’s sin demonstrates they are not God’s children, but Paul admonishes the Philippians to hold fast to the word of life so that they will be God’s children. Moreover, Israel was blemished, but the church should remain unblemished. Finally, Israel was “a crooked and twisted generation,” but the Philippians are to distinguish themselves as righteous in the midst of an evil generation. The many points of contact between Deuteronomy 32:5 and Philippians 2:15 indicate that we have a call to perseverance in these verses.

Finally, the call to “shine as lights in the world” probably alludes to Daniel 12:3, where believers are to shine like lights. Those believers who shine like lights will “be delivered” (Dan. 12:1). They will rise “to everlasting life” (Dan. 12:2). Hence we have another piece of evidence supporting the claim that Paul exhorts the Philippians to continue in the faith to the end in order to receive the end-time reward of eternal life.

CONCLUSION

I have argued briefly here that we have indications in exhortations given to both new believers and experienced believers that perseverance is required to obtain eternal life.¹³ NT authors did not promise an eschatological reward regardless of how someone lived in the future. Instead we have seen that both new believers and experienced believers are urged to persevere to receive eternal life. The varied examples given here suggest that this was commonplace in NT teaching. In the next chapter we are going to consider the many exhortations given to believers in the NT in which they are warned that if they fall away they will face eternal judgment.

¹³Such a statement does not deny that believers already enjoy eternal life. We have an example here of the “already but not yet” tension that pervades the NT. Believers already have eternal life but will experience it in its fullness when Christ returns.