



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

## Perseverance is Proof

2 Timothy 4:6-8

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<sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> 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.

### Introduction

Protestant Christianity is facing a serious crisis. Young people are leaving the church in huge numbers. In fact, researchers tell us that seven in ten evangelicals who grow up in the church, stop attending by the time they reach age 23. And of that number, less than half ever return to the church.<sup>1</sup> This means that one out of every four kids in our youth group will not continue in the Christian faith.

Or consider this from America's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. As of 2010, the denomination has sixteen million members. This means sixteen million people who've professed faith in Christ and been baptized. Yet in 2004, researchers discovered that on any given Sunday, only six million of those sixteen million could be found in church. That means roughly ten million professing Christians are missing in worship every week. Where did they go? Are they simply sleeping in or playing golf or having brunch? Or have they stopped following Jesus? Are they no longer persevering in the faith?

Real Christianity is a relevant issue. It's been our theme for several weeks now. We've been wrestling with what authentic Christianity looks like. For the past five weeks, we've looked at several *marks* of real Christianity: humility, meekness, contrition, Christ-likeness, and hunger for God. But today we take a look at what I'd like to call the *proof* of real Christianity: *perseverance*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Young Adults Aren't Sticking With The Church," USA Today, accessed online.

You know the old adage: the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. And so it is with real Christianity: *The proof of real Christianity is in the perseverance of real Christians.* As Charles Spurgeon says: “Perseverance is the badge of true saints. It is their Scriptural mark.”<sup>2</sup>

What is perseverance? It’s what Jesus said you must do if you’re going to enter into the kingdom of God. Describing the kinds of hardships that await those who go into the world bearing the message of the gospel, Jesus says: “And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13; cf. Matt. 10:23). Or to the persecuted believers in the churches of Asia Minor, he makes this promise: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 3:7).

Continuing in the faith is also what the earliest Christians told new converts they must do. “When [Barnabas] came [to Antioch] and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11:23). “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). “When [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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 14:21-22).

Perseverance is what real Christians do. If you’re real, you’ll arrive at the end of your life and are able to join with the Apostle Paul in honestly saying: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). And these won’t be mere words; they’ll be cross-purchased, Spirit-wrought, and hard-fought for realities in your life, if you’re real.

This morning I want us to focus our attention on this wonderful statement of perseverance from the Apostle Paul. For here he gives us three distinct pictures of what it means to persevere: first, it means to fight the good fight of faith and not give up; second, it means to finish the race and not stop; and third, it means to hold on to the faith and never let go.

### **Fight the Good Fight**

*Real Christians fight the good fight of faith and don’t give up.* As Charles Spurgeon says: “A Christian’s career is always fighting, never ceasing; always ploughing the stormy sea, and never resting till he reaches the port of glory.”<sup>3</sup>

Fighting the good fight of faith is what we see Paul himself doing. Even though he’s confident in the Lord, he still wages warfare against unbelief every single day, “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27).

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Enduring to the End,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12, p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Enduring to the End,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12, p. 292.

Paul is constantly engaged in the fight of faith because he knows the subtlety of sin. He sees how it works in his own soul. But he also sees how it works in the lives of others. Sadly, Paul's letters are spotted with the names of those who appear to have succumb to the subtlety of sin and unbelief: Hymenaeus and Alexander, who veered from a good conscience and so made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim. 1:20); Philetus, who has swerved from the truth and is spreading corruption like gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17-18); or Demas, who deserted the faith because he was "in love with this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Like the second and third seeds in Jesus' Parable of the Sower, these individuals professed the faith, but didn't persevering in the fight of faith. They looked real for a season, but the proof of real ultimately wasn't there.

Wandering away from the faith doesn't happen in a moment, but over time. Drifting usually begins very discreetly, with a desire that turns into a craving. And the craving, if left unchecked, over time becomes compelling, causing you to fall into temptation, get ensnared in sin, and stop fighting the fight of faith. This is why Paul pleads with Timothy, like a father would his son:

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:9-12).

Fighting the good fight of the faith requires that you put on the whole armor of God. This is what you need if you're going to be strong in the Lord and stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph. 6:10-11). In particular, you need to take up "the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16). Every day the Evil One fires flaming arrows of doubt at you; and without taking up the shield of faith to block his darts of doubt, you don't stand a chance in the fight.

But you also need to learn to wield "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6:17). There is no substitute for knowing the word of God and being able to draw upon its convicting power and truth in any and every circumstance. When temptation arises, you need to have the word of God close at hand, so you can stab the deceitfulness of sin in the belly and render it ineffective. Every time you feel discouraged or deflated or tempted to do something you shouldn't, stop and meet that temptation head-on with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. Fight back the desire for sin by feeding on the promises of Scripture.

Fighting the good fight of the faith is proof that you're real.

## **Finish the Race**

*Second, real Christians finish the race.* They don't quit. Regardless of the distance, they keep going. Regardless of the terrain, they press forward. Regardless of how they feel, they endure to the end. *Finishing the race is proof that you're real.*

I admire people who run marathons. Personally, I've never run one. And truth be told, I don't know that I ever will. Frankly, I don't know that I want to. I guess part of the problem for me is I can't imagine crossing the 20 mile marker without stopping to congratulate myself on

how far I've come! I'd want the crowds to cheer. I'd expect people to take my picture. I'd look for an official-looking guy to give me a big trophy!

It's tempting to view the Christian life that way. It's easy to think what counts is how far you've come or how long you've been running. Paul had certainly come a very long distance in his race with Christ. Yet he never loses sight of what ultimately counts: not when he began, or how he began, or how far he'd come, but whether or not he finishes the race.

Paul is fixated on the future, on finishing the race. When speaking to believers in Philippi about the hope of the resurrection, he reminds them: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, *but I press on to make it my own*, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12). Or to the elders in Ephesus he says: "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, *if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus*, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

Perhaps stress on finishing the race wouldn't be necessary if the Christian life were a gentle downhill slope. All you'd need to do is find yourself a chair with wheels or a skateboard, sit down on it, give yourself a nudge, and easily coast across the finish line.

But the reality is the Christian life isn't downhill; it's uphill. And the way forward isn't easy; it's hard. Jesus didn't hide this fact of the Christian life from his followers, but tells us plainly: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt. 7:13-14).

On his way to the Celestial City, Christian, the main character in John Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, comes to the foot of a Hill, where he sees that the path forward goes up the Hill. He notices that the path is called Difficult. There are two other paths that go around the Hill, one to the left and one to the right. He notices that some take one of these alternatives. But he sees what these paths are called: Danger is the one, Destruction is the other. He knows neither of them leads to the Celestial City. There's only one way to finish his race and find his way to the Celestial City: that's to run the race uphill, along the path called Difficult.

So it is for every Christian. The race is hard and the path is uphill. Which is why the Book of Hebrews encourages:

"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" (12:1-2).

If we're going to run with endurance and thus say with the Apostle Paul, "I have finished the race," then we must learn to run smart. First, we must draw strength from the great cloud of witnesses: examples of those who've persevered, mentors who've modeled faithfulness over a lifetime.

Second, we must also drop dead-weight. If you're going to finish the race, you've got to throw off the sin which clings so closely. No one can complete the Boston Marathon with a fifty-pound backpack slung over their shoulders.

And, third, we must stay focused on Jesus, who's already finished his race and thus shown us the way. Like Christ, we must fix our eyes on him, who is the Joy set before us, so that we can endure just like he did.

Finishing the race is proof you're real.

## **Keeping the Faith**

*Third, real Christians keep the faith.* They maintain a tight grip on the truth of the gospel and don't let go. At the end of their life, they're able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I have kept the faith." Keeping the faith is proof that you're real.

Real Christians realize there are *real threats* to the Christian faith. They don't shrug their shoulders when the Bible warns: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8); or when it says, "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light," and looks for someone to deceive (2 Cor. 11:14); or when Scripture cautions, "it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come" (1 John 2:18).

On the other hand, real Christians take Jesus very seriously when he says: "If you abide in my word you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). And they listen to Paul's charge to Timothy as a good word from them to hear: "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you" (1 Tim. 6:20). "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16).

Keeping the faith means growing in your understanding of the faith. It means leaving "the elementary doctrine of Christ and going on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). It means eating solid doctrinal food to increase your powers of discernment, so you can distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:14). It means attaining mature manhood, so that you're no longer children, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph. 4:13-14).

To help believers abide in God's word, the Lord gives to his church pastors and elders. They're responsible to shepherd God's flock. And the main way in which they do that is by faithfully setting forth the truth of God's word. This is why Paul exhorts young Timothy with these weighty words:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people *will not endure* sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and *will turn away* from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

You see, keeping the faith is a responsibility for every real Christian. But it is also a community effort, where we as a body seek to hold fast the word of life in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation (Phil. 2:15-16).

Keeping the faith is proof that you're real.

### **What about Eternal Security? Or Once Saved, Always Saved?**

Real Christians persevere. This means they fight the good fight of faith and don't give up; they finish the race and don't stop; they hold on to the faith and never let go. In fact, perseverance is proof that you're real.

Now, I realize this emphasis on perseverance raises questions in some people's minds about eternal security. Isn't it true that once you're saved, you're always saved? I think the Bible's answer to that question is a resounding, Yes!

But this doesn't mean, as it's sometimes thought to mean, that once saved, always saved—no matter what you do. That's not a biblical view, I don't think. Instead, the Bible's position is this: once saved, always saved—as seen by what you do.

Paul was very confident of the eternal security of believers. And he encouraged them to have this same assurance of their salvation. Perhaps his most well-known statement is this: "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).

But what we shouldn't overlook is the verse that comes immediately before it. Because it provides the reason for Paul's confidence: "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5).

You see, Paul was *sure* of their salvation because he could *see* their perseverance. They'd entered into gospel partnership with Paul and stuck with Paul through thick and thin—from the first day until now, he says. And so Paul could confidently conclude that these believers are real.

### **Perseverance Is Ultimately about God's Preservation of You**

But listen, even though perseverance is proof that you're real, it's not ultimately about you. Our eternal security doesn't rest on us; nor should we try to prove ourselves by our persevering in the faith.

It's true that perseverance proves you're real. But it's also true that your perseverance proves that God is real. It proves he's faithful to keep those who have truly entrusted themselves to his care. It proves that what he's said is reliable. It proves the Spirit's presence as real and powerful. It proves the new birth as permanent. It proves the sovereign grace of God

as able to equip and sustain you to do that which is pleasing in his sight. And it proves God is able to guard you through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:5).

Continuing in faith and persevering to the end, then, isn't something that should cause you to fret or worry, anxiously asking yourself whether it could possibly happen or how it might possibly happen. Instead, it ought to draw you deeper and deeper into *the preserving grace of God*. For God has committed himself to every real Christian, never to leave you nor forsake you.

### **A Good Diagnostic Question**

Ask yourself, then, this diagnostic question. Am I presuming upon the grace of God, or am I today trusting in the person of Christ?

The question shouldn't be: "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Savior?" Or, "When did you get saved?" But rather: "Are you relying upon Christ right now to meet all of your needs?" Or, "How is Christ working in your life?"

And our attitude should not be to get complacent, much less cocky, presuming to have this whole Christian thing in the bag. That's a very dangerous attitude to have. It's often the prelude to a spiritual face-plant, or something even worse. Paul thus cautions the overly self-assured Corinthians: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

### **Conclusion**

And yet anyone here today can have full assurance of salvation right now. All you need to do is entrust yourself to Jesus Christ, rely fully upon him by faith, truly believe that he is able to forgive your sins because of his death and give you eternal life because of his resurrection from the dead.

If this describes the disposition of your soul, your heart's attitude toward the Savior, then everything the Bible says about those who believe is true for you, right now.

The absolute safest thing we can do is entrust ourselves to him each and every day. Spurgeon is exactly right: "If you trust yourselves to God, he will preserve you; but if you try to keep yourselves, you will fail."<sup>4</sup>

This is the key to eternal security: entrusting yourself entirely to God. He will preserve you. For he is able to bring you safely to your heavenly home.

"He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23).

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "The Preservation of Christians in the World," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12, p. 283.

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