



When confronted with difficulty, we must choose between continuing on or giving up. *Before You Quit* offers stories of ordinary people who did extraordinary things for the kingdom of God because they simply kept going. Learn how to cultivate perseverance that counts the cost and follows through.

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1

THE BATTLE FOR PERSEVERANCE

"Why all this weeping?
You are breaking my heart!
I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem
but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus."

—THE APOSTLE PAUL (Acts 21:13 NLT)

Charles Frederick Peace was a burglar and murderer in England in the 1800s. He was finally caught in Blackheath and taken into custody. He was tried at Leeds Assizes, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged at Armley Prison.¹ English evangelist Leonard Ravenhill describes that day:

On the morning of his execution, Peace. . . was escorted on the death-walk by the prison chaplain, who was reading aloud from *The Consolations of Religion* about the fires of hell. Peace burst out "Sir, if I believed what you and the church of God say that you believe, even

if England were covered with broken glass from coast to coast, I would walk over it, if need be, on hands and knees and think it worth while living, just to save one soul from an eternal hell like that!”²

Both Jesus and the apostle Paul expressed similar determination. “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that *he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*” (Matt. 16:21). Agabus the prophet warned Paul that if he went to Jerusalem, he would be “bound by the Jewish leaders . . . and turned over to the Gentiles” (Acts 21:11 NLT). Paul’s friends begged him to cancel the trip. But Paul replied, “Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! *I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 21:13 NLT).

Jesus, Paul, and even Charles Frederick Peace can teach us something about determination and perseverance. Perhaps the real reason Jesus and Paul persevered through difficulty is they saw something about God’s purposes, which lifted them above an ordinary, temporal existence where the vision became more important than anything else, including personal safety. Perhaps we too—when we see something bigger than ourselves, when God touches our lives with His glory—will do something radical for Him at great personal risk. But without such a vision for God’s purposes in and through us, without a transcendent experience with God that transforms our paradigm, determination and perseverance are simply much less likely.

It could be asked, “Do I need a transcendent experience

to have perseverance?” Is not the human will enough? Do not human beings have within themselves the drive to live, survive, achieve, to be great, and stand for honor and courage? Do we really need outside impetus? These are legitimate questions. The apostle Paul recognized the human propensity for courage and even ultimate sacrifice. “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die” (Rom. 5:7 NIV). Humanity’s ability to strive for something beyond themselves is a God-given quality, tainted now by sin, but still latent within us whether we acknowledge God or not. However, to strive for something selflessly, solely for the benefit of others, even for people who might be unworthy of our sacrifice, is something else entirely. Without a transcendent experience where God transforms the human heart—salvation by God’s grace—such altruism is a rare thing. We are all too naturally self-absorbed. Selflessness is a characteristic unique to God. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8 NIV).

THE TROUBLE WITH TROUBLE

Every difficulty reveals *how badly we want something* and *how much we believe in something*. When difficulty confronts us, we have two choices: forsake the vision or fight well until the goal is reached. To quit is to abandon the hoped-for future. To persevere is to embrace pain, look disappointment in the face, and press courageously forward until the storm passes and the sun comes out again. But one thing is always true about

difficulty: it reveals what we really believe and what we really want. Nobody ever ascended Mount Everest who didn't want to climb to the top. Nobody ran 26.2 miles who didn't want to finish a marathon. Nobody ever built a successful business who didn't want prosperity, and no one has ever conquered alcoholism who didn't want to be sober.

Do I quit and flee, or do I persevere to victory? These are the two options of *every* difficulty. The challenge will be tough, yet it is in the difficulty we discover what we really want, what we really believe, and where our motives really are. *Do I really trust God? Do I truly want this? Am I willing to press through?* At that moment, we decide what to fight for and what kind of person to be.

The great tragedy of our day is the fact that a great good—the life of ease, comfort, and safety with which we have become so accustomed—has stolen from us familiarity with difficulty. We simply do not know how to handle disappointment and pain, and therefore struggle when it comes near. Even Christians, who rely on God's sovereignty and acknowledge man's sinfulness, are influenced by our culture's self-assurance. We expect things to go well for us, and we place an inordinate amount of confidence in science, technology, and human wisdom to solve humanity's problems. Prosperity and a relatively long season of global peace has numbed us to the facts of history: humanity is not yet redeemed; we are still very broken and haven't changed as much as we think. Without God's transcendent work in our lives, we find it almost impossible to persevere through loss that does not have an obvious benefit to us. Tim Keller observes:

Sociologists and anthropologists have analyzed and compared the various ways that cultures train its members for grief, pain, and loss. And when all this comparison is done, it is often noted that our own contemporary secular Western culture is one of the weakest and worst in history at doing so.³

When trouble comes to us, it arrives as an unwelcome imposition and lays pain and uncertainty at our feet. We question and sometimes even blame God. Difficulty upsets our equilibrium. The pain of the loss is bad enough, but delays, insufficiencies, and worry about the future can be just as difficult. Difficulty robs us of or denies us access to something we value, and we either flee the circumstances or fight to endure.

QUIT OR ENDURE

When pilots are training to fly, they are taught to anticipate emergencies. In addition to mastering a specific airplane's flight controls and aerodynamic limits, they learn how to control their emotional responses under pressure. Pilots overcome reactive emotions such as denial, overconfidence, resignation, and panic by countering them with memorized response statements. For example, the corrective response for resignation is, "Not everything is hopeless. I still have choices." In every scenario, a pilot learns to *fly the airplane!*

I had a frightful experience with panic when I ran my first triathlon. Veteran triathletes warned me: "You survive the swim, kill the bike ride, and cruise the run." I trained for

months, especially the swimming. I had a deathly fear of drowning from fatigue while swimming in deep water. To counter that fear, I trained in shallow water until I built up my confidence. On event day, I stood in line on a long pier for my turn to jump into the bay. At the horn, I leapt into the brisk water and started swimming. Before I covered a third of the distance, I was in trouble. Gasping for breath, my body quivering, and panic rising, I knew I was going to drown. A small lifeboat was floating nearby, only ten feet away. I desperately wanted to paddle over and grab for safety. Do I give up and escape the danger? Or do I stay the course and risk drowning?

As I floundered in the water, I gathered my wits and began telling myself, “I’m NOT going to drown! I’ve trained for this! I still have choices!” I pushed the panic down, steadied my breathing, and relaxed into the breaststroke until I got my wind back. Then, I pressed forward toward the shoreline. In short, I survived the swim! Then killed the bike ride, cruised the run, and came in fourth in my class!

After forty years in leadership, I’ve seen this kind of reactive behavior over and over. When people are confronted with difficulty, they quit “flying the airplane.” Too many people squander great opportunity because they can’t make it through the first test. We might make big sacrifices for the *idea* of a goal: we spend money, deny comfort, and even leave a stable life to pursue a dream. But then, when hardships come lurking from the shadows, and things don’t go the way we hoped, the dream gets foggy, excitement wanes, and we are left with a simple choice: Do I quit or endure?

REALIZATION OF VISION

In his book *Nothing Like It in the World*, Stephen Ambrose writes about the building of the transcontinental railroad in America. It was a monumentally ambitious vision, the linking of the nation's two coasts by rail. In 1863, at the beginning of the project, some California enthusiasts decided to sponsor a launch ceremony. They invited a large selection of West Coast dignitaries to attend. Collis Huntington, one of the most important backers, was invited but declined, saying, "If you want to [celebrate] over the driving of the first spike, go ahead and do it. I don't. . . . Anybody can drive the first spike, but there are months of labor and unrest between the first and the last spike."⁴

We may have a vision to accomplish something, but that is only the beginning. The substance has not yet been realized. Vision will always be tested on its way to realization. Difficulty is the perfect test! It is God's way of hauling our values out of the shadows into the light. Whether it is a failed life goal or a personal tragedy, difficulty reveals what we really care about, how deeply rooted our faith really is, and how centered we are on accomplishing something God gave us to do in His purposes for our life. Difficulty refines our trust in God and proves our commitment to the task. The power of difficulty is found in the opportunity it gives us to practice determination and learn perseverance.

We must never forget that the *attainment* of goals (even God-inspired ones), the length of time it takes to get there, and the avoidance of difficulty along the way is never guaranteed.

Achievement of goals and victory over challenges are not endowments. They are won in the crucible of real-world pain and gritty courage, one intentional step after another. The Bible repeatedly reminds us of this great confluence of dreams and challenges in the journey toward the fulfillment of God's purposes.⁵ Moses lived in obscurity for decades, and then struggled to lead the emerging Jewish nation for decades more before God's promises to him were fulfilled. Ironically, Moses did not live to see its full realization. Joseph was a privileged teenager when his jealous brothers sold him into slavery. His youthful dream of headship in his family was tested through years of unjust hardship in slavery and prison. It was finally fulfilled when he was thirty years old in ways that surpassed everyone's expectations.

How do I distinguish between my goals and God's? The simplest answer is found in a statement made by David in the Psalms. "I delight to do your will, O my God" (Ps. 40:8). When we settle this question about our motivations and make our primary goal in life to follow God's leading, to allow Him to be first in all things and His will to be our delight and passionate pursuit, then we position ourselves to discover a profound freedom. We can hear from Him and more confidently walk forward into dreams and goals that He gives us.

In another psalm, David states, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). As a young man, I took great encouragement from this psalm, believing that as I let God be first in my life, holding nothing back, but rather delighting in His will, He would shape my desires. I found that God directed my steps in my

relationships, in career and job decisions, and even in things as mundane as term papers I had to write. I also discovered, as I learned to delight in the Lord, that I did not always pursue God with complete wholeheartedness and purity. I struggled against my fallen nature and its appetites. I fought depression and discouragement and struggled with self-confidence. But I kept my accounts short with God, by prayer, confession, and rededication to Jesus as my Lord. This is the story of every follower of Jesus—daily going forward in faith and continual realignment with Him and His purposes.

Somewhere between our hopes for a trouble-free life and the reality of difficulties, we *can* experience God's grace *and* forward movement toward His designed goals. The key is in perseverance. Perseverance navigates through the sometimes shadowy and painful gap between unrealized goals and their ultimate fulfillment. The lessons we learn in the gap, on a patient but determined journey, teach us valuable perspectives about the God we serve and His amazing redemptive purposes for the world.

In the gap—whether that time is spent in passive, prayerful waiting like Paul in prison or in active service doing something that is less than we want out of life—God is testing us. Do I really value His ways? Do I trust His sovereignty? Am I willing to wait on His timing and conduct myself as a Christ follower in the interim? Am I willing to learn and grow in Christ through difficulty and delay?

Endurance teaches us about God's eternal grace at work within us to make us more like Jesus. When we see Jesus in our troubles, we can glory in them as a gift from God who

allows us to share in His redemptive work on a broken planet. Endurance teaches us about the reality of a world broken by sin and what it cost God to bring salvation. While Christ's work is complete, there is a battle to be engaged and resistance to be overcome as we walk out our salvation and bring His gospel to the world. Determination, balanced with patience and humble surrender to God, is necessary. This is the story of Jesus' example. It is the story of the early church. It is our story. But God gave a promise to people who endure in their faith: "The one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13).

When delays, difficulties, and disappointments happen to us—whether we suffer from a tragic loss, an unexpected setback, or a self-inflicted wound by a bad decision—we lose something, and that loss presents us with a "quit or endure" challenge. Most loss fits into four categories: **time**, **fun**, **treasure**, and **relationships**, which we will explore in the next chapter and consider how we can endure, survive, and even thrive through loss to discover what God offers us in exchange.

Discussion Questions

1. How do God's calling on your life and your own aspirations connect or conflict?
2. How do you persevere through difficulty? In what ways does difficulty threaten to rob you of confidence and resolve?
3. In what context have you been tempted to quit instead of endure? What did that look like?

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