

THE PRIZE OF PERSEVERING—PART ONE

James 1:2-4, 12

(NASB) Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ¹² Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

INTRODUCTION

What is a surefire way to prove what someone or something really means to you? By the sacrifices you are willing to make to gain or maintain what is dear to you. The satisfaction of saving from great danger those who are more precious to us than life itself inspires our highest sacrifices; motivating us to embrace extreme hardships willingly we would normally avoid at all costs. Cyrus the Great (ca. 600-529 B. C), the founder of the Persian Empire who allowed the Jews to return to Israel from their captivity in Babylonia (**Ezra 1:1-4**), once reportedly captured a wealthy prince and his family. When they came before him, Cyrus asked the prisoner, "What will you give me if I release you?" "Half of my wealth," was his reply. "And if I release your children?" "Everything I possess." "And if I release your wife?" "Your Majesty, I will give myself." Cyrus was so moved by his devotion that he freed them all. As they returned home, the prince said to his wife, "Wasn't Cyrus a handsome man!" Looking with profound love at her husband, she said to him, "I didn't notice. I had eyes only for you—the one who was willing to give himself for me."

It's one thing to say we love someone. It's quite another to prove our love convincingly. Did **Jesus** convincingly prove His love for us? Yes, both by *what* He did for us and *why* He did it. **Ephesians 5:2** (NASB) eloquently describes *what Jesus* did for us: "And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." Christ's sacrificial love is to guide the actions of His followers toward others. **Hebrews 12:1b-2a** (NIV) explains *why Jesus* sacrificed Himself for us: "[L]et us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame." Did **Jesus** rejoice *because* of His sufferings? No. He rejoiced over what He would achieve *by* His sufferings. We are urged to "endure" difficulties that might discourage us as we deal with the responsibilities God sets before us in the same way **Jesus** did: not because we have any joy in the sacrifices demanded of us by these responsibilities, but because of what can be achieved for the Lord *by* our sacrifices. We often have little idea what God can achieve through any of us if we'll gain the character qualities of perseverance.

On December 21, 1866, foolhardy Lt. Wm. Fetterman disastrously disobeyed orders. While on routine patrol, he thought he could defeat "the whole Sioux nation" with the 80 cavalry troops under his command. When he pursued the Sioux deep into their territory, Fetterman and all his men were killed. This left Ft. Phil Kearny, built in the heart of Sioux lands in what is now northwestern Wyoming, gravely undermanned. The Sioux, led by the great Red Cloud at the pinnacle of his power, held the Fort under a state of siege. General Henry Carrington knew the Fort—low on men, supplies, and ammunition—could not survive an Indian attack. The nearest help lay at Ft. Laramie, 236 miles away as the crow flies. Fort Kearny had no telegraph. Only a courier might get a message through to Ft. Laramie in time. It would be almost certain death to attempt riding that distance alone through hostile Indian country. A howling blizzard had also set in. The temperature dropped to 35 below zero. Snow piled around the walls and crews were kept busy shoveling it away to prevent the Indians from walking over the walls. General Carrington believed the danger too great to order someone to go. On the night of December 22, he appealed for a volunteer.

Several hard-bitten veteran troopers and scouts were present that night. Even if they somehow managed to escape the Indians, they thought they'd freeze to death while lost in the blizzard. They all turned down General Carrington's request; believing it a suicide mission. John "Portugee" Phillips, a combination scout,

trapper, Indian fighter and all-round plainsman born in the Azores Islands of Portugal, then stepped forward. Carrington gave Phillips his personal mount, a Kentucky thoroughbred and the fastest horse on post.

His ride in a blinding blizzard remains an unexplained wonder. The trail had long since disappeared. All landmarks were covered. Snow drifts ranged from five to twenty feet in depth. Still, Phillips rode on; straight as an arrow; guided only by instinct and prayer. He stopped just to rest his horse and to eat. By dawn of December 24, he reached Horseshoe Station, a full 190 miles from Ft. Kearny and just 45 miles from Ft. Laramie. The telegrapher transmitted the plight of Ft. Kearny and urged Phillips to stay and rest. He refused. He didn't trust the telegraph. A good thing. The lines were down and the message never got through. After a brief rest, Phillips rode again into the swirling white nothingness.

Now the penetrating cold started to take its toll. Icicles formed on his head; his hands, knees and feet froze. His lips turned blue. Snow piled high on his buffalo robe. Yet, he forced himself and his horse onward. He arrived at Ft. Laramie on Christmas Eve, interrupting the annual Yuletide Ball. His horse collapsed and died from exhaustion. Phillips, as a snow-encrusted giant, choked out the story of Ft. Phil Kearny before lapsing into unconsciousness from exhaustion, over-exposure, and fatigue. He'd ridden 235 miles in two and a half days, through a sub-freezing, blizzard-blown, snowbound wilderness. It took him months to recover. But within hours of his arrival, the 1st Battalion of the 18th Infantry left Ft. Laramie bound for Ft. Phil Kearny. They arrived in time to save everyone at the Fort; soldiers, wives, and children!

The world will always remain in awe of what even a few persevering people can achieve! Our two Outline points are The Price of Persevering and The Prize of Persevering.

I. THE PRICE OF PERSEVERING

We can scarcely imagine the previous hardships John "Portugee" Phillips must have endured, prior to volunteering for his death-defying ride on December 22, 1866. Otherwise, he'd have lacked the confidence and staying power his seemingly impossible mission demanded. For the rest of his life, this once ordinary man repeatedly rose to the occasion of standing for what's right in God's eyes regardless of the personal cost to him or the cowardice of others. In our study of **James**, it's never been suggested it's easy to gain the persevering character qualities God seeks to develop in all followers of **Jesus**. Look again at **James 1:2-4**: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In **James 1:2**, the Greek word for "trial" describes "a situation that puts us to the test to prove or to improve our abilities." I made the freshmen high school basketball team. I dreamed of becoming a top player but had weak hands. I got a pair of hand exercise grips. I would squeeze them repeatedly in sets until my wrists burned with fatigue. How did I improve my hand strength? I put my hands to the test. How does God improve our strength of character? By putting us to the test.

The Greek word for "testing" in **James 1:3** is the word used for refining precious metals to remove their impurities. Most of the world's ore would have little value if the impurities could not be removed so these metals can be fashioned into what is useful and valuable, as coins and jewelry. The Apostle Peter knew from experience that gaining the enduring character value of refined gold to make us more useful to God is not an easy process. It requires intense times of struggle (or even failure) to achieve three precious changes in us (according to **James 1:2-4**): (1) We are purified by trials of what is un-Christlike about us; (2) Faults and sinful impulses that would disqualify us from God's service are removed or subdued; and (3) we gain the performance standards that lets God know He can count upon us to complete the tasks He assigns to us.

James knew that when we are being put to the test and purified by intense trials, the last thing on our mind may be how God is using these struggles to build Christlike "endurance" that benefits us for now and forever. Our main thought is more like, "When will this nightmare end?" Because God's time frame for

the length certain trials should last and our time frame are usually far different, God probably does us a favor by not letting us know when and how we will get out of certain messes. It's like the joke about an elderly man who goes to see his Dr. about some health concerns. After a thorough examination the Dr. tells him: "I have good news and bad news for you; what would you like to hear first?" He says, "Let me have the bad news first, Dr." His Dr. informs him, "You have cancer. I estimate that you have about two years left to live." "Oh no!" the man replied, "That's just awful! In two years my life will be over! What kind of good news could you possibly tell me after this?" The Dr. said, "You also have Alzheimer's. In about three months you're going to forget everything I've just told you."

God knows if we knew how much longer certain situations would last, we could be overwhelmed with worries about how we can possibly deal with them that long, instead of trusting God to enable us to deal with our struggles one day at a time. God does promise, though, in **James 1:5**, to give us "wisdom" to cooperate better with Him in the trials He designs for us to make us more Christlike. "Wisdom," as James learned from his half-brother, **Jesus**, is "the ability to view all of life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, rather than just for our purposes." **I Peter 1:6-8** (NLT) seeks to inspire us with God-centered wisdom, to lift our spirits in difficult times: "There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. ⁸ You love Him even though you have never seen Him. Though you do not see Him now, you trust Him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy."

A look again at **Hebrews 12:1b-a** reminds us both of the *price* and of the *prize* of persevering. The *prize* is always worth the *price*, but few people are willing to pay the necessary *price* to become a *prize-winner* for the Lord: "[L]et us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame." The Greek word translated "perseverance" in **Hebrews 12:2** and **James 1:3-4** is the noun form of the Greek verb translated "perseveres" in **James 1:12**: "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." Greeks combined two words to produce the word we translate as "perseverance" or "endurance." The basic meaning of the first word is "remain." The second word means "under." Thus, "perseverance" is "the ability to remain under." When we're faced with difficult circumstances that are weighing heavily upon us or afflicting us, we don't seek "to run out from under" (or run away) from our God-given duties. Instead, we continue to move toward the successful completion of our task, as did the young carpenter in Nazareth when constructing a table His father Joseph told Him to build, even when he had poor or difficult wood to work with or He would rather have run off to be with His friends; or as an athlete who overcomes obstacles to keep from quitting before the contest is done.

CONCLUSION

Next week, we'll continue our look at the themes of the *price* and *prize* of persevering. I close today by reading a comparison of people in whom God has developed the character qualities of persevering, who can be called "winners," and those who persist in the character faults of quitting, who can be called "losers."

Winners vs. Losers

A Winner is always part of the answer; a Loser is always part of the problem. A Winner sees an answer for every problem; a Loser sees a problem for every answer. A Winner feels responsible for more than his or her job; a loser says, "That is not my job." A Winner says, "It may be difficult but it's still possible"; a Loser says, "It may be possible but it's too difficult." A Winner sees the gain; a Loser sees the pain. A Winner says, "I must do something"; a Loser says, "Something must be done."

When a Winner makes a mistake, he says, "I was wrong"; when a Loser makes a mistake, he says, "It wasn't my fault." A Winner makes commitments; a Loser makes promises. Winners have dreams; Losers have schemes. A Winner sees the potential; a Loser sees the past. A Winner is a part of the team; a Loser is *apart* from the team. A Winner says, "I'm good, but not as good as I ought to be"; a Loser says, "I'm not as bad as I could be."

A Winner chooses what he or she says; a Loser says what he or she chooses. A Winner listens; a Loser just waits until it's his or her turn to talk. A Winner stands firm on values but compromise on petty things; a Loser stands firm on petty things but compromise on values. A Winner follows the philosophy of empathy: "Don't do to others what you would not want them to do to you"; a Loser follows the philosophy: "Do it to others before they do it to you." A Winner *makes* it happen; a Loser *lets* it happen.