

THE PRIZE OF PERSEVERING—PART TWO

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

Four words posted inside the window of a Hollywood jewelry store reveal a lot about modern ideas of marriage commitment: "We Rent Wedding Rings." The classified advertising section of the Kokomo, IN, *Tribune* carries personal messages—birthday greetings, Valentine wishes, etc. A husband wrote: "Thank you, Shirley Susser, for 18 years of wedded bliss. You are the most wonderful, beautiful wife in the world, and I love you more than ever. If it were not for the fact that I promised Dan, Larry, and George that I'd play pool tonight, I'd certainly be with you on the anniversary of the most important day of my life."

Jesus identifies Himself as "the bridegroom" (**Matthew 9:15; Matthew 25:1-13**), and the Church comprised of all believers is "His Bride" (**Revelation 19:7-9**). When we commit ourselves to **Jesus** as our Savior and Lord, **Jesus** commits Himself to us as part of His Bride. He longs to walk through life with us as His partner. We can enjoy as close of a personal, emotional, and spiritual intimacy with **Jesus** as we are willing to commit ourselves to Him. Part of the process of "saving His people from their sins," as the name "**Jesus**" implies (**Matthew 1:21**), is removing attitudes and actions that grieve and disgust Him, which are barriers to such intimacy. **James 1:12** proclaims **Jesus** "has promised" a "crown" of the richest rewards and privileges of eternal life "to those who *love* Him" (not merely serve, obey, or honor Him).

God entered into a marriage covenant with the Israelites He rescued from Egypt, according to **Jeremiah 31:31-32** (NLT). God points to the enhanced union the Messiah (Christ) would achieve between the LORD and His people. "'The day is coming,' says the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.³² This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,' says the LORD." This is why the LORD charged Old Testament Israel with spiritual "adultery" when they forsook Him for other gods (as the Book of **Hosea** heartrendingly portrays).

Marriage between a man and a woman is an invitation to intimacy—the most honest, uplifting, and transforming closeness that humans can experience. But does marriage guarantee such intimacy or only make it possible? People can be married for 30 years or more, yet remain so self-centered their marriage is more of a convenience than a commitment; more something to be endured than enjoyed. If we're not committed to removing barriers to intimacy—attitudes or actions grieving our mate—we may never experience the sweetness of a transforming union. Sometimes men are blind to their faults. An anonymous male came up with this quote, "Marriage teaches you loyalty, forbearance, self-restraint and a lot of other qualities you wouldn't need if you'd stayed single." Sometimes women are blind to their faults. A couple accompanied their son and his fiancé to a meeting with her minister to sign some pre-wedding ceremony papers. While filling out the form, their son read aloud a few questions. When he got to the last one, which read: "Are you entering this marriage of your own free will?" he looked over at his fiancé. "Put down 'Yes,'" she said.

Today, we take a second look at The Price of Persevering and then highlight The Prize of Persevering.

I. THE PRICE OF PERSEVERING

When James, **Jesus**' half-brother, began promoting the God-given benefits of "trials," his words may have seemed strange to the early Christians to whom he wrote: "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." The Common English Bible states, "My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy.³ After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.⁴ Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing." These believers were still learning the truth that when Christ's followers are faced with persistent, difficult situations, changing *us* may be a greater priority to God than changing our circumstances. By urging them, "Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials," James was not telling them how to *feel* about their "trials" but how to *think* about them. "Joy" in **James 1:2** describes a state of well-being; not well-feeling. James urges Christians to believe our difficult circumstances are acts of God's grace to give us what He knows we most need. The more we gain a Christlike character, the more we become God's blessing agents and the more we can be blessed by a special closeness with Christ. What is **Jesus'** intimate embrace worth to you?

To achieve this change in how we think about our times of God-designed "testing" and "trials," James urges in **1:5** (NIV) to seek "wisdom" from our Heavenly Father: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." "Wisdom," as James learned by observing his half-brother, **Jesus**, as He dealt with nearly every possible personal, family, and community need, 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." God's "wisdom" allows us to realize that the prizes to be gained by persevering in acquiring Christlike character qualities make the price we need to pay to gain such perseverance worth it.

But James never suggested it's easy to gain the persevering character qualities God seeks to develop in **Jesus'** followers. Greeks combined two words to form the noun translated "perseverance" or "endurance." Their basic meanings are "to remain" and "under." If we gain God-honoring "perseverance" and are faced with difficult circumstances, we won't seek "to run out from under" (or run away from) our God-given duties. In **James 1:12**, "the Lord has promised" a prize to one who "has been approved," ("has passed the test," ISV): "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." By cooperating with our Lord when He uses "trials" and "testing" to purify us of faults and sinful impulses that grieve or dishonor Him (**James 1:2-4**), this qualifies us to receive "the crown of life." Greek grammar leads us to understand James meant "the crown *which is* life": the richest rewards and privileges of the eternal life **Jesus** as the Son of God came to Earth to offer to us. **Revelation 2:10** specifies **Jesus** Himself is the One who personally bestows "the crown of life" upon "those who *love* Him" worthily. The more we faithfully commit ourselves to Him in marriage-quality love, the more **Jesus** crowns us with the blessings of His love!

II. THE PRIZE OF PERSEVERING

The lives of two famous English writers, George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824) and Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), convincingly demonstrate The Prize of Persevering. Both were cripples. Byron was born with a club foot. It pointed downward and inward and could not move up and down normally. He learned to walk so smoothly using a protective boot that his disability was scarcely noticeable to others. He became a competent boxer and horse-rider, and an excellent swimmer. But he was so vainly obsessed with praise for his otherwise remarkable looks that bitterness and self-consciousness about his lameness consumed him. He sought relief for his self-centered and tortured soul in every form of personal indulgence and sexual conquest. He died at age 36 as a larger-than-life international celebrity of remarkable abilities and great passions. But his literary characters were prideful perfectionists and self-indulgent hedonists who quickly tired of people and places in their vain pursuit of an enduring happiness they never found (of which *Don Juan* is an example). Byron left a legacy of massive debts and of having ruined the lives and marriages of multiple women. He died never having known the bliss of true, enduring love.

Sir Walter Scott became the first English-language author with a truly international career in his own lifetime. His plays, novels, and poems were widely read across Europe, Australia, and North America. Many remain classics of English literature, including *Ivanhoe* and *Rob Roy*. His lines, "O, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," are among the most often quoted in all English literature.

Sir Walter Scott lived by the words of **James 1:2-4**. He knew that the Greek word for "trials" describes "situations that puts us to the test to prove or to improve our abilities." He also knew the Greek word for "testing" is used for refining precious metals to remove their impurities. Walter Scott contracted polio at age two; crippling his left leg for life. He was never heard to speak one bitter word about his handicap, even to his closest friends. When his first love broke his heart by marrying another man, Scott symbolized his acceptance of God's will by marrying another woman on Christmas Day, 1797. They remained happily married until her death in 1826. Scott made the best of the life and abilities God gave to him. He knew from personal experience it requires intense times of struggle to achieve the three precious changes promised us in **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 work standards to complete the tasks God assigns to us in a God-honoring way. Sir Walter Scott would have agreed there's a high price to pay to gain the character qualities of persevering, but he would also tell us, if he were here today, the prize of persevering makes the price worth it! Scott once received a letter from Lord Byron in which Byron confessed, "Ah, Scott, I would give all of my fame to have your happiness!"

The crucial differences between Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott can be summarized this way: Byron raged throughout life as a *tortured* soul; Scott rejoiced throughout life as a *tutored* soul. Byron believed by pleasing himself foremost he would find lasting happiness. Scott yielded his heart as a young man to **Jesus Christ**. He believed by pleasing His Savior foremost he would find everlasting happiness. The values of our Savior shine through Scott's writings as they did in his personal life. Scott's villains pursue knowledge, wealth, and power to fulfill their dreams. His heroic characters uphold the intangible values of loyalty, love, and generosity, based upon their devotion to the Lord, as the keys to success and enduring happiness.

Scott's Christian character was put to a severe test in his final years. At age 54, he was already in failing health and his wife was dying of an incurable disease, when he was plunged into debt of a half million dollars. A publishing firm he'd invested in heavily had collapsed. He could have filed for bankruptcy. But he refused, as a Christian, to renege upon his promises to his creditors, from whom he asked only for more time. The remaining seven years of Scott's life were a testimony to his persevering Christian character as he engaged in a race with death to pay off these debts before he departed this Earth.

CONCLUSION

In the last minutes of his life, Sir Walter Scott asked to be taken to his library of over 9,000 volumes so his son-in-law could read "The Book" to him. His son-in-law asked him, "Which book?" Scott replied, "There is but one, the Bible." Scott soon departed this life for Heaven with these words of **Jesus** from **John 14:1-3** (KJV) ringing in his ears, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me. ² In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." The next words Scott heard were probably similar to what we find in **Matthew 25:21**, "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord'" (NKJV). The prizes of faithfully loving our Lord are many. If **Jesus** spoke these words to you when you first entered Heaven, would they make the price you paid to persevere in becoming more pleasing to **Jesus** seem worth it all?

"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."