

“With My Whole Heart I Seek You” 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting

Day 15: May 17, 2018: From Lament to Praise

Psalm 22:22-26: *I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: ²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! ²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. ²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him. ²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord! May your hearts live forever!*

Recently I watched a film entitled *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*. *Nefarious* is about human trafficking. It features interviews with victims of trafficking in Eastern Europe, Asia, and the United States. Much of the film is lament – as people who have been exploited, used, and abused tell of the horrors they suffered.

Two of the ladies who tell their stories in *Nefarious* are Helena and Annie. They are both former prostitutes. (The film makes it clear that prostitution is not the “career choice” many make it out to be. Rather, the world of prostitution exploits the vulnerabilities which are already present in women and then brutally dehumanizes them). At first both Helena and Annie were able to speak with composure about what they went through. But, as they delved further into their stories, the pain and trauma welled up from within them.

The interviewer asked Helena, “What type of emotions were you feeling during that time?” Her response, as she began to cry was, “Intense fear. Intense fear. Of real rejection, of feeling totally unloved, unwanted, uncared for. I was just totally lost... within myself...” And then she broke down in sobbing over the memories and the pain.

Then the film cuts back to Annie’s story. She says, “So that’s when the heavy, heavy cocaine abuse came in, and I just wanted to disappear. I remember just lighting that pipe and just looking forward to that hit. All of a sudden I just heard my ears ringing really loud. And everything went black. Like my eyes just shut down. My eyes were wide open but went black, and I fell back, and um, I was having a heart attack. The pain in my chest was like... it felt like somebody was stabbing me with a knife in my heart. But I couldn’t see anything, and all I could remember was that there was nothing but blackness around me. And I realized, “Crap, I’m dying... I’m dying.” Then she said, “All I could remember was Jesus. That’s all I could think about was God. And I saw my life literally flash before my eyes. And I called upon his name. I just said, “Jesus, Jesus. I’m... I’m alone. I’m sorry, and come and get me. Save me from myself. I’m sorry. And all I could say ‘sorry, I ‘m sorry I was a prostitute. I was so ashamed.” And the ambulance came. They took me in the hospital. And the doctor came over and said, ‘Um, do you know how lucky you are? You have a lot of drugs in your system lady, and you’re allergic to narcotics.’ And he’s like, ‘God’s with you.’ And I knew that, um, Jesus heard my prayer.”

Then the film returns to Helena, who continued to tell her story: “I was in such despair and desperation. I would really cry out to God, you know. And then one night He appeared to me in a dream. I would go into this beautiful garden, and sat on the bench was the Lord Jesus. And I would go to him, and we would sit, and we would just talk about... I don’t even know what we spoke about, but he never, ever once condemned me... It was such beauty and such love that emanated from him. Oh, I was just... well, I fell at his feet... and when I got up he’d say, ‘Helena, I’m waiting for you...’

Both ladies realized the depth of God’s unconditional love for them. They were afflicted, but as Psalm 22 says, “²⁴ For he has not despised

or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him (v. 24). When Helena and Annie cried out to Jesus in their affliction, Jesus heard their cries and delivered them from their suffering. Their lives have been absolutely transformed by God's amazing grace. Helena is now a wife and mother. Annie started a ministry to share the love of Christ with ladies who are still trapped in prostitution. Both ladies now worship Jesus and are passionate about telling other people about Him.

This is what our God does. He takes cries of lament (Ps. 22:1-21), and He turns them into songs of praise (Ps. 22:22-31) which reverberate out to "the ends of the earth" and the "families of the nations" (v. 27). So, if you are in the middle of lament, do not give up hope. If you are wondering, "How long, O Lord" know that the Lord Jesus hears you just as he heard Helena and Annie. Know that God can and will deliver you according to his will and according to his steadfast love. Further, if you have experienced God's deliverance, if he has turned your lament into praise, then praise Him! Say with David in the congregation of God's people: "Fear God! Glorify God! Stand in awe of Him!" Declare the excellencies of Him who brought you out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2)!

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: *"O God, I rejoice in You. You are holy and wonderful and awesome. You do not despise the prayer of the afflicted. You hear their cry and deliver them. Thank you for how you turn cries of lament into songs of praise. Thank you for your unconditional and unbreakable love which you have given us in Jesus Christ. May the ends of the earth come to worship you for your unfailing goodness, O Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

Day 16: May 18, 2018: Holiness is love done well

Romans 10:9-10: *For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor." In its original context in Leviticus 19, the command "love your neighbor as yourself" is very much focused on this truth. In fact, "the second greatest commandment" comes in that section of Leviticus as the culmination of a series of "do not" instructions for neighbor-to-neighbor relationships. Some examples are

- You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. [Lev. 19:11]
- You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. [Lev. 19:13]
- You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind... [Lev. 19:14]
- You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people... [Lev. 19:16]
- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people... [Lev. 19:18]

Stealing, lying, oppressing, cursing, slandering, taking vengeance... these are not the ways of love. Love does not harm another person as these actions do.

This truth about love make its all that much more difficult for us to face the fact that we do, at times, bring harm to the people we claim to love. Sometimes we do lie and injure trust. Sometimes we do curse or slander and diminish someone's sense of dignity and self-worth. Sometimes we do hold grudges and look for ways to take revenge.

How can we turn from these harmful ways? We can draw nearer and nearer to God. As we seek God, God will transform us to be like himself.

The overriding emphasis of Leviticus is the call for God's people to share in God's holiness. **Leviticus 19:2:** "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." In a recent book New Testament scholar Scot McKnight explains the meaning of holiness:

"The word *holiness* means to be in God's presence as one "devoted to God," and because of devotion to God it also means "to be separated from the world." This dual meaning strikes the right biblical balance. God is holy. To be with God, to be devoted to God, and to walk with God mean that the companion of God is separate from the world. Devotion to God entails the rejection of devotion to the world. But rejecting the world is not the primary emphasis. Holiness is first and foremost devotion to God."

Since holiness is first and foremost devotion to God, it follows that the more we draw near to God and allow his Holy Spirit to work in us, the more we will reject the ungodly ways of deceit, theft, slander, grudge-holding, and the rest. Therefore, to grow in holiness (devotion to God) is also to grow in love, which does not harm its neighbor. McKnight writes:

"Here's another way to say it: anything that is not loving—of God and of others and of self and of all God's creation—is unholy. But every act of loving God, others, self, or creation is holiness. Love is not an alternative to holiness. Holiness becomes visible when we love God, others, self, and creation. Holiness, I like to say, is love done well."

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer will help you get started: "*Lord God, I want to draw near to you. I want to be completely like you. I want to love others as you love me. Help me to be kind as you are kind, truthful as you are truthful, patient as you are patient, and forgiving as you are forgiving. Help me to walk justly,*

and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you, my God. Lord, I forsake the ungodly ways in which I sometimes harm other people. Please change me by your Spirit, that I will love my neighbor as I love myself. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Day 17: May 19, 2018: The Open Statement of the Truth

2 Corinthians 4:1-4: *Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

The church of Jesus Christ is, as theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, "apostolic" in two important senses. First, the church is apostolic because its "gospel and its doctrine are founded on the testimony of the first apostles, the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ..." As disciples of Jesus today we are obviously not eyewitnesses of his life, suffering, and resurrection; but we have inherited the apostolic testimony and teaching about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus: this testimony is collected for us in the writings of the NT.

Second, the church is apostolic because "it [the church] exists in the carrying out of the apostolic proclamation, the missionary charge." The entire body of Christ – each of us personally and all of us collectively – are sent into the world to serve the mission of God.

2 Corinthians is a thoroughly apostolic text. It was written by the apostle Paul and, because of its largely autobiographical nature, it gives us a tremendous amount of insight into Paul's understanding and experience of his apostolic ministry. In today's passage Paul wrote of his commitment to "the open statement of the truth." This determination to proclaim the gospel in a sincere and straightforward

way stood in contrast to “disgraceful, underhanded ways,” “cunning,” and “tampering with God’s word.”

Commentator Colin Kruse explains that the word for “cunning” is used again by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:3 where he referred to how the serpent deceived Eve. Paul, therefore, “asserts that there was no attempt to deceive by cunning in his preaching of the gospel...” Next, Kruse says that “tampering with God’s word” probably referred to diluting it by mixing it with ideas which were foreign to it. Paul refused to make the gospel something less or other than it was in order to make it more palatable to his hearers.

As we fulfill the apostolic task of preaching the gospel today, we must follow the example of the apostle Paul. We can never use deceptive or underhanded practices in our personal witness or our congregational ministry. If we do, we will bring the gospel into disrepute and we will be accountable to the judgment of God.

Neither can we “tamper with God’s word.” This temptation is perhaps more difficult for us to resist. Adding to the gospel unbiblical promises – such as “God wants you happy, healthy, and wealthy,” or “God helps those who help themselves,” – can seem attractive ways to embellish the simple message about Jesus. However, these “embellishments” are really dilutions which distort the true gospel.

There is another way to tamper with God’s word, and it has a long history in the life of the church. Recently a very well known and influential evangelical preacher brought this heresy into the open again. It is the heresy of disconnecting Jesus from the Old Testament. In a recent sermon this preacher said that what God did in Jesus is a “stand alone event” that is detached from everything which came before it. He said that “God has done something through the Jews for the world... But the ‘through the Jews’ part of the story is over, and now something new and better and inclusive has come.” He also stated, “God’s arrangement with Israel should now be eliminated from the equation.”

These statements are undoubtedly motivated by an evangelistic desire to make the message of Jesus more palatable by disassociating it from the difficult and troubling passages in the OT. Nevertheless, they are a tampering with and distortion of God’s word. The Old & New Testaments belong together as “the whole counsel of God,” and the person and work of Jesus cannot be understood apart from everything in the Old Testament which led up to and prepared the way for him.

As Paul notes in verses 3-4 of our passage, Satan is doing a fine job of blinding the minds of unbelievers to the gospel all on his own. He certainly doesn’t need our help in creating confusion about or rejection of Jesus. However, when we use cunning deception or when we tamper with God’s word that is exactly what we do – we aid Satan in his work of keeping people away from the truth that is in Jesus.

Let us rather be committed to openly stating the truth about Jesus through both our words and deeds so that we will “commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: *“Heavenly Father, help your church to avoid all underhanded and disgraceful ways. Help us to flee deceptive practices. Help us never to tamper with your word. Holy Spirit, give us strength and wisdom to openly share the truth of the Gospel. And Lord, please remove the veil which blinds the minds of unbelievers. Please open their eyes so that they can see and love the light of the glory of Christ. In His name, Amen.”*

Day 18: May 20, 2018: We Preach not Ourselves, but Jesus Christ
2 Corinthians 4:5-6: *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

As Christians we must constantly be working to keep ourselves out of the way. Even in matters of religion, in deed often *especially in matters of religion*, the pride of the human heart can thinly veil its self-promotion in a veneer of pretended piety. Under the cover of even a deep and genuine devotion to Jesus, the self-centered desires for recognition, influence, and financial gain can assert themselves and prove a constant snare.

The “disgraceful, underhanded ways,” and the “cunning,” and the “tampering with God’s word” which Paul disavowed (2 Cor. 4:1-2) certainly had at least some of their motivation in the desire to “preach ourselves” in the hearts of those who practiced them. Pride and selfish ambition are constant dangers to Christian discipleship and Christian mission.

That is why we must keep in mind and live by Paul’s word in v. 5: “*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.*” Here the order is correct: we proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ, and we make ourselves the servants of others for the sake of Jesus. The foundation for this ordering is the greatness of what God has revealed in Christ: in the face of Christ we have the very “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (v. 6). Jesus Christ reveals the living God to us. Jesus Christ brings us into a living relationship with God. All human vanities pail in comparison.

In order to continually keep Jesus first and ourselves as the servants of other people for Jesus’ sake, we must do at least two things.

First, we must guard our hearts (Prov. 4:23). We must always be aware of and on guard against the subtle ways in which our pride will turn our good intentions and good deeds into opportunities for self-promotion. This can be as simple-yet-dangerous as doing something kind for a neighbor, not so that they will give glory to God, but so that they will think highly of me as a good person. We must always pray

that God will help our motive to be to glorify God above all else (Mt. 5:14-16, Col. 3:17).

Second, we must be bold enough to speak Jesus’ name and to claim our association with him. We must not be ashamed to be known as Christians. Rather, we should praise God that we bear that name (1 Peter 4:16). When we have the opportunity to do so, we should do and say things which let others know that we follow Jesus. We should offer to pray for our neighbors. We should invite our friends to church. We should explain that we care about justice for the poor and oppressed because Jesus does. We should invite other people to consider the claims of Jesus by giving them a Bible or a Christian book to read. If we are ashamed of Christ and his words, he will be ashamed of us (Mark 8:38). And why would we ever be ashamed of Jesus unless out of prideful concern for our own reputation? So, let us rejoice in letting others know that Jesus is Lord. Let us be as bold as the apostles who “every day, in the temple and from house to house... did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (Acts 5:42).

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started. “*O Lord, help me to guard my heart against pride and self-promotion. Help me to want only to bring glory and honor to your name. Give me courage and boldness through the Holy Spirit to let others know that Jesus is Lord, and that I am their servant for Jesus’ sake. In His perfect name I pray, Amen.*”

Day 19: May 21, 2018: Practicing Confession and Repentance

Psalm 51:1-4 [NIV]: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*

Confession and repentance go together. Sin must be admitted so that it can be rejected. We must acknowledge that we are going the wrong way before we can turn to go the right way. David's prayer in Psalm 51, which he prayed after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his affair with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, is a prayer of both confession and repentance.

David **confessed**, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (v. 4). Of course, David had also sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba, and against the nation of Israel. The words of verse 4 should not be taken to mean that the only offense which matters is the offense against God, for Jesus clearly taught that his disciples must seek to reconcile with those whom they have sinned against and to forgive those who have sinned against them (Matt. 5:23-26, 18:15-35; cf. Eph. 4:32-5:2). What David's prayer does emphasize is that repentance begins by acknowledging that the most serious offense which sin causes is the violation of God's holy character and the transgression of his moral law for people. As Dave Harvey has written, "Sin is infinitely wicked because it rejects the one who is infinitely holy and good."

The work of confession, as part of the discipline of repentance, must be done intentionally. Douglas J. Rumford, in his book *Soul Shaping: Taking Care of Your Spiritual Life*, discusses "immediate confession," "end-of-day confession," and "whole-life confession." *Immediate confession* is acknowledging sin and seeking forgiveness as soon as we realize that we have sinned. *End-of-day confession* is the practice of taking time before sleep to reflect on one's day and to acknowledge any sins that are recognized then. *Whole-life confession* "focuses on releasing significant life-pattern sins." This is the kind of confession that is necessary when repenting from sins which have long been harbored and practiced. There are other ways in which confession might be practiced, but these are helpful guidelines.

Repentance is a response to God's convicting word. David did not repent of his sins of adultery and murder until after Nathan had

declared God's word to him (2 Samuel 12). Hebrews 3:7-19 warns of the danger of hardness of heart and exhorts disciples of Jesus to be obedient to God's voice. Just a few verses later in Hebrews, the author writes, "Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account" (Heb. 4:12-13, NAB). None of our sinful thoughts, desires, words, deeds, or habits are hidden from God. We stand "naked and exposed" before him and like a powerful search light, God's word searches the depths of our hearts. So, to harden our hearts and to resist repentance is only to fool ourselves (remember the "deceitfulness of sin"?). It is to dupe ourselves into thinking that we can get away with sin when in the long run we will not, for we will have to answer to God. But God's desire is to restore us and to make us like Jesus. Therefore, He addresses us with his word now, that it might penetrate our hearts and lead us into repentance and obedience.

To practice repentance, we must take four steps:

- 1) Regularly read and meditate upon God's word. This is one of the most important means we have for cultivating sensitivity to the presence of sin in our lives and a readiness to respond obediently when God convicts us.
- 2) Pray according to Psalm 51:6: "Lord, teach me truth in my inner being, teach me wisdom in my heart." Following Jesus means allowing God access to the deepest parts of who we are. We must invite the Holy Spirit to give us hearts that are soft and submissive to God's word.
- 3) Develop an accountability relationship with a trusted brother or sister in Christ (see Heb. 3:13 and James 5:16). We need to give a trusted fellow Christian permission to ask us hard questions and hold us accountable for obeying Jesus.

- 4) Pray according to Psalm 139:23-24: We must take the initiative and ask God to show us sinful habits in our lives that we might repent of them and allow God to change us.

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: “Heavenly Father, thank you for give us confession and repentance as ways to deal with our sin in the light of your grace. Thank you that you want us to be honest with you, and that you want us to turn away from sin and walk in obedience to you. Thank you that you are faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Day 20: May 22, 2018: What Might God Do?

1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20: *After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. ¹¹ And she vowed a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”... They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked for him from the Lord.”*

The text says that the Lord “remembered” Hannah when he enabled her to conceive a son (v. 19). The use of the word “remembered” does not mean that God had previously forgotten about Hannah. Rather, this is a common way in which the OT describes God acting on behalf of his people, often in response to their prayers. God remembered Noah and the animals on the ark (Gen. 8:1). God remembered Abraham when he rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:29). God remembered his covenant with the patriarchs in response to the groaning of the Israelite slaves

in Egypt (Ex. 2:24). Many other examples could be given. To say that God remembers his people, then, is to say that he focuses his attention on them and intervenes in their lives for their good and according to his purposes.

In this story, God remembered Hannah and took away her anguish and disgrace by giving her a son. But God was also accomplishing far more. **God can work in response to our prayers to accomplish his purposes which extend far beyond our own circumstances.** Hannah wanted a child to remove the disgrace of being barren and to silence the attacks of her rival Peninnah. She even vowed to dedicate her son to the Lord (v. 11), and she kept that vow (1 Samuel 1:21-28). Hannah was not thinking about kings and kingdoms or about messiahs when she wept before the Lord and cried out to him for a child. Yet the child whom the Lord enabled Hannah to conceive, and whom she gave into the Lord’s service was Samuel, who became the transitional figure between two great eras of Israelite history – the era of judges and the era of kings. Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. Under God’s direction, Samuel facilitated the rise of the kingship in Israel. He anointed Saul as Israel’s first king. Later he anointed David as Saul’s successor and it was to David that God promised an eternal kingship (2 Samuel 7). It was upon this covenant between God and David that the psalmists and prophets fostered the expectations of a coming king who would be the righteous deliverer of Israel and the nations. It was from David’s line that this promised ruler came to bring God’s salvation to all people (Matthew 1). So, God worked out his larger purposes in history in response to the anguished prayers of one ordinary, barren woman. **What might he do in response to our prayers?**

Last week I received this message from Nancy Moore of **Africa Fire Mission**, which is one of the missions which BCC partners with. Nancy wrote in an email, “I woke up this morning to this message from the Marianki Fire Brigade, In Kilifi County Kenya. **‘We’ve been having daily devotions here in our station and we’ve been using the material from AFM 90 days of encouragement which has been a blessing to us Firefighters and friends of Firefighters . Today, we launched a church service here in our**

station. We thank God for his doings. May God continue to be glorified in the Fire service!! Welcome all to friends of Firefighters fellowship 10:00 to 11:00 AM every Sunday. Purpose to share vision with the Fire service community through prayer and teaching the word." Then Nancy continued, "I am overwhelmed at the faithfulness of God. As we pursue His purpose for us, he blesses the work in ways we cannot imagine! Please pray for these firefighters and their new church."

Just as in Hannah's situation, God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or imagine. Africa Fire Mission is evangelistic in nature, but its primary purpose is not to start new churches. However, as Dave & Nancy Moore have obediently pursued God's calling and faithfully prayed for God's power to work, God has accomplished – and is accomplishing – his kingdom purposes in amazing and unexpected ways.

So, let us persevere in believing prayer, for God can use our requests and his answers to do great and mighty things which bring glory to his name!

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: *"Lord, you are great and mighty! There is no limit to your power and understanding. Thank you for the great things you accomplished through Hannah's son Samuel. Thank you for all that you are doing through Africa Fire Mission, and especially the new church in the Marianki Fire Brigade in Kenya. O Lord, bless, strengthen, direct, and protect that church. Thank you also, Lord, for how you will do for more than I can imagine in response to my prayers. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

Day 21: May 23, 2018: Christian Endurance

Hebrews 10:32-39: *But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a*

better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

All athletes – runners, swimmers, tennis players, basketball players, and others – need great endurance. Endurance is "the ability or strength to continue or last, especially despite fatigue, stress, or other adverse conditions." Athletes need endurance for the sake of competition in their sport. Christians need endurance for the sake of following Jesus faithfully until the end of life on this earth.

As part of an overall exhortation for disciples to endure in Christian faithfulness the book of Hebrews contains several passages which warn believers about the dangers of falling away from faith. This text (10:32-39) is part of one of these warning sections (10:26-39). The first section of this passage (10:26-39) warns believers not to continue deliberately sinning after receiving knowledge of the truth and reminds believers that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31). The second section (10:32-39) is then an encouragement for believers to persevere in their faith through trials and sufferings.

This encouragement to endure in faith has three aspects:

- First, the author reminded the believers of how they endured sufferings with joy in the past [10:32-34]. Just as athletes' bodies grow stronger and more durable through constant exercise and practice, so the "muscles" of our faith get stronger through constant use and perseverance. Once we have walked with the Lord for a while, we will be able to look back and see those times when we made it through hardship. We will be able to recognize how God's grace was active in

our troubles, and we will see how our faith developed depth and resiliency as a result. This building up of the “muscles” of our faith gives us strength and confidence to continue to persevere in following Jesus through the trials of life.

- Second, the author reminded the believers of the reward awaiting them after their sufferings [10:34-36]. Athletes endure for the sake of winning. The crown of victory which they achieve will fade away. But the Christian’s reward is eternal. The apostle Paul reflected very personally on this in his final letter to his “son in the faith” Timothy: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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” (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Paul endured a multitude of sufferings for the sake of the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:16-31). He kept going through it all because of the “joy set before him” – the promised reward of eternal life with God. This same hope is ours in Christ Jesus, and therefore we can persevere through trials because we know that the “crown of righteousness” awaits us in God’s presence.
- Third, the author quotes from Habakkuk 2:3-4 to call the believers to continue to wait on the fulfillment of God’s promise [10:36-39, and this OT quotation prepares the way for the author’s great list of those who have lived by faith and finished the race in anticipation of God’s promise in Hebrews 11]. It is noteworthy that here the author quotes this passage from Habakkuk which is the same text that was so pivotal for the apostle Paul [Romans 1:16-17, Galatians 3:11]. In its original context the words of Hab. 2:3-4 are God’s words to the prophet who is bewildered by God’s inaction in the face of unrighteousness and injustice (Hab. 1:2-4, 12-2:1). The Lord tells the prophet that he must remain faithful as he waits for the Lord to make good his word.

Believers who suffer persecution and difficulty may, with Habakkuk, cry out to God and wonder “O Lord, how long?” (Revelation 6:10). And believers who suffer persecution and difficulty today will receive the same word as the prophet received because it has been re-issued to the church: “Do not shrink back or throw away your confidence. Persevere in faith, do the will of God, and you will receive what has been promised.” Many of God’s people through the centuries have been “faithful to the end.” We can find encouragement to endure in our faith by looking to their examples (Heb. 11).

Let us then persevere in our faith. Let us set aside the sins which distract and entangle us – greed, lust, selfish-ambition, fear – and let us run the race of faith by fixing our eyes on Jesus. When we endure hardships and trials let us find strength in God’s promise and in the example of all those who have gone before us in faithfulness.

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started. *“Heavenly Father, may your Spirit give me strength to endure in faithfulness to you. Help me to remember how you have been with me in previous sufferings and help me to know that you will continue to be with me no matter what. Help me to have patience as I wait on your promise. And help me to keep my eyes fixed on the reward of eternal life so that I might continue to run toward the goal. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*