

The Reward of Perseverance in Faith

A Bible Study on Matthew 15:21-28

Study Bible Studies 31 August 2008

Hebrews 11:1-6

Matthew 15:21-28 (quoted)

Hebrews 12:1-3 (quoted)

Today we will meditate on the theme "The reward of perseverance in faith." Our reflection draws on Hebrews Chapter 11, verses 1 to 6, and Matthew Chapter 15, verses 21 to 28.

The critical observation here is remaining in faith irrespective of whatever adverse circumstance we may find ourselves in during our life's journey. In other words, hanging on, come what may. Here are some situations we encounter, one time or another, in our lives, when we wonder what we can do to get out of such unpleasant experiences:

What can we do when we have endured long hopelessness, and we are about to lose hope? What do we do when every attempt to find help has ended in disappointment? What do we do when we desperately look for something to happen, and it does not happen? What do we do when something that was very important in our life is taken away? What do we do when it seems that our prayers get only as high as the ceiling and then stop, and we imagine that God is not listening at all? What do we do when things get so bad that we just want to curl up and die?

The Scripture tells us to have patience and continue with perseverance in faith. It tells us to hang on.

The Meaning of Faith

Let us look at what is meant by "faith." According to Webster's Dictionary, faith is "an unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence." Hebrews chapter 11 verse 1 tells us: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

In the context of the characters described in Hebrews Chapter 11, these were people who exercised faith in God at crucial points. What they hoped for was that a living God was present through all their difficult situations, though they could not see Him physically. They responded to Him in faith. Such faith in God is regarded to have enabled the biblical characters from Abel to Rahab to achieve ends which were otherwise unattainable. This is what the ancients were commended for. Two main things stand out about these ancients: they all had faith in God, and secondly, many of them defied death for the sake of their faith. Hebrews Chapter 11 goes on to enumerate several further acts of implicit faith in God shown by these heroes of faith. Though they were highly

commended for their unwavering faith, they are yet to receive what was promised, namely eternal life. They are waiting in the wings, as God has better plans for all believers, and they too will be made perfect with us.

The Race of Faith

We must understand that a Christian's journey through life is like running an obstacle race. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it:

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

In the race of life that we run, the finish line is Jesus Christ. He began and finished this race before us. Jesus never lost sight of where He was headed, that exhilarating finish in and with God. Jesus put up with everything that came along the way: the cross, the shame, whatever it was. And now He is there, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When we find ourselves flagging in our faith, we should go over our Lord's story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility He ploughed through. That will give us the encouragement to "hang on" in faith.

Christians must run the race not as a casual stroll, but as a race, a difficult struggle, something like an obstacle race. The race of life is an agonising, demanding course and requires Christian endurance if one is to win. "Perseverance," then, is not merely sitting around and waiting for something to happen. It means endurance and the power of determination, including the ability to finish what is begun.

The Woman of Canaan

Let us look at the incident of the woman of Canaan, narrated in Matthew Chapter 15, verses 21 to 28. The same incident can be found in the Gospel of Saint Mark, Chapter 7, verses 24 to 30. The woman, whose daughter was possessed with an evil spirit and had failed to be cured by any other means, cried out to Jesus: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil" (verse 22).

This woman was a loser on a number of counts. She was a Canaanite, one of the original inhabitants of the land of Israel. Canaanites were

regarded by the Jews as outsiders and heathens, people who did not know about God. She was a woman, and here she was making a nuisance of herself, calling out to a rabbi in total disrespect. The disciples regarded her as a loser and tried to shut her up and send her away. In fact, she even dared to argue points of theology with Jesus, something unheard of for a woman in those days, arguing with a rabbi.

The woman understood where she stood: she knew she was at the bottom of the heap. She knew she was beyond help. Nobody cared what happened to her. Why should God now take notice of her? She had nothing to lose; her dignity and pride were gone. She came to Jesus and cried out to Him with the same directness a second time, her manner more a shout than a formal plea, utterly undeterred by how it might look to those watching.

This woman was not begging for herself. Her cry for mercy was also a cry of love. Her child was sick. There are times in life when the only thing a parent can do for a child is pray. That is what this woman did.

And what did Jesus do? He ignored her. He did not answer a word. He showed no interest in her. His disciples, quick to assume and slow to understand, made the assumption that Jesus wanted to be rid of her, that she was a nuisance.

Why did Jesus ignore her, letting her go on and make what looked like a fool of herself, embarrassing everyone? Was He testing the woman, or testing His disciples? Perhaps it was both. Of course, Jesus had heard her making all this fuss, and added insult to injury by declaring, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (verse 24). In other words, "I did not come to help outsiders and losers; I have come only for the Jews." This is hardly what we expect of Jesus! We know Jesus spoke of His mission to outsiders, and His actions show how much He loved losers. But then, shock of shocks, He refers to her and her people as dogs. What a field day today's media would have had with an incident like this! The headlines would have been screaming: "Spiritual leader publicly slams Canaanites; public outcry for his dismissal."

A Difficult Incident with a Happy Ending

We know this was a difficult incident, yet it has a happy ending.

Jesus initially acts as though He does not even notice this woman crying for help: "But he answered her not a word" (verse 23). That seems neither kind nor compassionate.

In verse 24, Jesus restricts His ministry to Israel alone: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This flies in the face of the very many times when Jesus seemed to delight in being with those shunned by the religious establishment of His day, including so many non-Jews.

Most scandalous of all, in verse 26 Jesus as much as calls this woman and her daughter dogs: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs."

But when this woman, for the sake of her daughter, accepts this apparent put-down, Jesus completely changes course, praises the woman's faith, and heals the daughter.

The woman was not insulted. She did not let this "dog" comment get her down. She swallowed her pride and said: "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (verse 27). Jesus answered: "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt" (verse 28). And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

We also saw that, wise as she was, and prudent as she was, she would not have held out to the end and obtained the blessing she desired for her daughter, if it had not been for her faith.

The Door of Faith

The only thing that will help us to follow after Christ until we find Him is faith. All our groaning will not help us. All our doubting and our trembling will be of no avail; our feeling that we are too vile to be saved, and that faith would be presumption in such sinners as we are, will not aid us. But believe that Christ can save us, and trust in His power and love, and He will save us. Come to Him as the woman of Canaan came, with her importunate cry, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David," and He will have mercy on each one of us, even as He had upon her. The way to liberty lies through this one door of faith. Therefore believe, and live.

Application

We can look at faith from another perspective. Christians are grounded in the benevolent purpose of God, who imposes upon His children the kind of chastening that will strengthen and correct them. The full nature of it is revealed in that it wears many faces, appearing and reappearing in an infinite pattern of sorrows and hardships. It is the experience of all of God's children, there being no exceptions whatever. But at the end of it, for those who endure it in perseverance and faith in our Lord, there is no denial of blessings by God. The most wonderful people on earth are those who have passed through the chastening experiences of life, whose faith, love, understanding and sympathy are grounded in the true love of God, and whose lives, as a result, have been expanded and beautified.

Finally, the lesson for us is:

- Hold on to the line of faith; hang on.

- Stand firm to the end.
- Believe on God's word.

Amen.

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