

The Perseverance of the Saints – Part II

THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE THE EARNEST PURSUIT OF ASSURANCE 4-17-88

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Suppose that you are a gymnast. You are doing a floor exercise in competition and have made a good beginning. You are in the middle of your routine and suddenly find a strange weariness coming over you. You start to get a little wobbly in your arms and legs. You set yourself up for a series of back hand springs that comes is supposed to a climax in a double back flip with a full twist. As you turn and begin your handsprings the weakness causes a terrible uncertainty to come into your mind. You hit your last hand spring to try to get the height you need for the double back flip. Your elbows buckle very slightly. And as you leave the ground the strangest thing happens. Everything goes into slow motion. You seem to be moving just an inch per second. And as you ascend and begin to tuck, you hear a voice from the side of the mat. And you recognize it as the voice of your coach.

What I am picturing here is the church of the Hebrews to whom this letter was written. They are the gymnast in this picture, and the writer of Hebrews is their coach. As he writes today's text he is catching them in midair. If they can hear him and respond they will land on their feet, complete the routine and perhaps get a good score, say, 8.5 or 9.1. But if they don't hear him, their uncertainty and weariness may cause them to give out half way through the flip, and come down on their head and break their neck. The text might also be catching you in midair this morning. If so I hope you listen carefully to the coach so that you land on your feet and finish the life of faith and obedience God has called you to.

Let me show you where I get this idea of his catching them in midair. Consider first of all 6:10, "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake (lit. "in his name") in serving the saints, as you still do." Now from that verse it looks as though this church is doing all right doesn't it. They have done works of love, they have done them in the name of God -- that is in reliance on him and for his glory -- and they have served the saints, and still are serving them. This is why I said the gymnastic routine of their life had a good beginning and even going into this handspring looks like about and 9.1. Only the sharpest judges and a good coach can detect the problem at this point. What problem?

Look at 5:12-14, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil."

Now this is not nearly so flattering as 6:10. We need to look very carefully at verse 14 to see what the problem is with these people. First of all they don't seem ready to hear some advanced teaching that the author wants to give them. That solid food is for the mature, he says, but you are not mature. Verse 11 says, you have grown dull of hearing.

Why? What's the root of the problem? Verse 14 takes us deeper. They don't have their faculties, or senses, trained to distinguish good from evil. (Incidentally the Greek word for "trained" in this verse is the word from which we get "gymnast" in English.) The problem with these people is that they are not very accomplished at separating what is good from what is bad, what is right from what is wrong. There has been some sort of lapse in their progress in this gymnastic ability. They ought to be morally alert and sharp and discerning and discriminating in their battle with sin and evil. But they aren't. Their discerning faculty seems to have lost its edge.

Why? Does this verse take us deeper? Yes it does. There is one other phrase in the verse we haven't looked at yet, namely, the phrase, "by practice". "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. The NIV says, "by constant use." So why aren't these people mature, and ready to move on to more advanced teaching? Because their moral faculties are out of tune. There is a moral readiness for teaching as well as an intellectual one. They seem not to have it. Things are morally fuzzy. They've lost the cutting edge of insight between good and evil.

Why? No practice. Verse 13 means that they have not taken the word of righteousness and exercised with it. They have not worked out fully the practical, moral implications of the knowledge they do have. And so they are not ready for the meat of advanced teaching.

Now what are we to make of this? In 6:10 we read that these people have worked, loved, served the saints and are still serving. But in 5:11-14 we read that they are immature and unable to make the moral distinctions that come with training and practice in the word of righteousness.

My answer is that the author is catching them in midair. He sees both things. He sees some work, love and service. And he sees evidence of neglect and drifting and lack of practice. The one gives him hope that they will land on their feet and finish the routine of righteousness. The other makes him concerned that they could land on their head and break their neck.

Sometimes it takes a good coach to tell when a gymnast has been sloughing off. He sees that they are easily winded. He notices the unsure planting of the hands. The toes are not quite pointed, the fingers have no finess, the landings are off balance. It's clear to the coach that progress has leveled off, and things are starting to go backward. In no way is this gymnast ready for anything more advanced. He has clearly been negligent in his training and exercise.

Now what does he need? What can the coach do for such a gymnast like this? Well he needs at least two things, and so there are two things the coach does for him. 1) He needs some immediate help to get down out of this double back flip onto his feet instead of his head. 2) And he needs some new patterns of practice and growth so that he doesn't keep drifting backward and ultimately give up the sport -- which in this picture stands for the Christian life.

Now what does this God-inspired coach do? He tries to do two things.

1) First he tries to bring the gymnast to a safe landing from the dangerous position he is in doing this double back flip with a sense of weariness and uncertainty and instability.

There are a lot of Christians who get themselves into a desperate situation because they have neglected their salvation (2:3), they've drifted away from the word (2:1), they've lost the cutting edge of discernment (5:14; cf. Rom. 12:2) and now they are in a situation where they feel they are hanging by their spiritual fingernails and could drop any minute.

Well here is this gymnast in mid-flight about six feet off the mat upside down and just about to lose his bearings and come down on his neck. We've got to put him in slow motion because the coach has to have time to say what the Bible says.

I think the coach says two things. Actually he shouts these things.

1.1 First he shouts, "Find the floor!" "Find the floor!" Which means get the floor in view. When you are doing a back flip, your a goner if you can't get your bearings on the floor. If all you see is a swirl of ceiling lights and grandstands you're done for. "Find the floor!"

Which is a paraphrase of Hebrews 3:1, "Consider Jesus!" or 12:2, "Look to Jesus!" Jesus is the one sure thing. He is the rock, the foundation. Get him in view when everything else in your life is swirling and you will land safely. The coach knows that panic is the worst enemy in the midst of a dangerous routine. And panic comes from a building sense of weakness and uncertainty -- or we might say, a lack of assurance in the Christian life. And the main cry of this book is: Jesus is sure! God is sure! The cross is sure! The covenant is sure! The promises are sure! Fix your attention the things that are sure! "Find the floor!"

1.2 That's the first thing the coach shouts to the gymnast in midair. The other thing he shouts I don't even have to paraphrase. I take it verbally from Hebrews 12:12, "Lift your drooping hands! Strengthen your weak knees!" We might say, "Pull yourself together!" Get your hands up! Tuck your knees!

In other words the coach wants him first to get his bearings by fixing his attention on the floor. Find the floor! Consider Jesus! Keep him square in view. But then something else has to happen for the gymnast to land safely. The sight of the floor, has to have a strengthening, reassuring effect in his body. Getting yourself oriented on the floor dispels the panicked feeling. And in its place brings a surge of reflex of hope and gracious agility.

That's what the coach wants when he shouts, "Lift your drooping hands! Strengthen your weak knees!" He means, Respond to the floor. The coach of Scripture and the floor of Christ conspire to keep the saints from breaking our necks again and again.

In passing I might just mention that some of us are so prone to hear the commands of Scripture as burdensome and pressuring. We shouldn't feel that way. We should think of the commands of Scripture as the shouts of a coach who wants us to land on our feet and finish the routine of a righteous life and inherit the gold medal of glory.

Now remember we said that this gymnast needs two things. 1) He needs some immediate help to get down out of this double back flip onto his feet instead of his head. The coach gave him that help, and now he has landed. He walks sheepishly over to the coach and knows now that he needs something else too. 2) He needs, we said, some new patterns of practice and growth so that he doesn't keep drifting backward in his skill and his confidence and ultimately give up gymnastics altogether -- which for us means give up the pursuit of holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

2) So what does the coach say now to this gymnast so that he will hang in there? He says Hebrews 6:11-12, "We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

Notice three steps to the inheritance in verse 12. First, faith, second, patience or longsuffering, and third, the inheritance. Faith is foundational, it leads to patient endurance in a life of holiness or righteousness. And that life then is the sure path to the inheritance.

Notice how this pattern is confirmed, for example, in 10:35-36. "Do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward" -- that's step one, have faith!

Then it goes on in verse 36, "For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God" -- that's step two, the reason you must not throw away your faith is that you need endurance in doing the will of God and only faith can give you the strength to do it.

Then verse 36 ends, "And receive what is promised." That's step three, the inheritance that you reach on the road of obedience to the will of God empowered by faith.

So we go back to 6:12 and we see these three steps again: be imitators of those who (one) through faith, (two) and patience, that is, patience in doing the will of God (10:36!), (three) inherit the promises.

In my picture, inheriting the promises corresponds to getting the medal at the end of the gymnastic routine. And patience in doing the will of God corresponds to finishing the routine without breaking your neck or walking off the mat in disgrace. And faith corresponds to that sense of stability and confidence and assurance that you will finish.

And so the most basic thing that the coach says to us gymnasts in this text is in verse 11, "Show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end." Now I take the full assurance of hope in verse 11 to be virtually the same as faith in verse 12. For two reasons:

First because the connection between verses 11 and 12 suggest it. It would go like this: Try to keep your full assurance of hope to the end, so that you can be like those who through faith (that is, through this assurance) and patience inherit the promises.

The other reason I think the assurance of hope in verse 11 is the same as faith is that 11:1 says "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for."

So the thought of verses 11 and 12 goes like this. Now it has four steps. Let's read them backward. Step 4: I want you to inherit the promises (get the gold medal). Step 3: So don't give up in your routine of righteous living. Be patient in it. Step 2: The strength to keep you going in obedience to do the will of God is faith, namely, the assurance of hope, that by God's grace you will make it through the routine and that the reward will be infinitely worth it all. And Step 1: Be earnest to maintain a strong faith, seek to realize the full assurance of hope.

Which leaves us for today with just one more question. What is the prescription for realizing the full assurance of hope? We already saw that when the gymnast was six feet off the floor, upside down, about to lose his bearings and break his neck the coach restored his hope by shouting, "Find the floor." Consider Jesus. And that surely remains the basic answer.

But it is not the whole answer. There is another one in our text. We've seen it already but let me point it out again in a new connection. Notice 6:12: The alternative to having assurance is "becoming sluggish".

Realize full assurance of hope, the writer says, so that you do not become sluggish! So if we could find an antidote to sluggishness, we would also have a prescription for assurance.

That antidote is precisely what our text gives us. You can't see the clue in English, but in the Greek the word sluggish is exactly the same word that is translated dull in 5:11. "We have much to say, which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."

That's very important to see, because this very dullness is the enemy of assurance, and the antidote to this dullness would be the prescription for assurance. And that antidote is precisely what we can learn from 5:11-14. In fact we've already learned it -- at the beginning of this message.

They are dull of hearing because they have not trained their faculties with regular practice in the distinguishing of good and evil. This means that the faith they claim to have in God's word and in the doctrines of Christ is not being exercised in the thing it was designed for, namely, a life of joyful holiness.

And we all know what happens to an organ or a limb of the body that is not exercised -- it atrophies. It shrivels. It may even die. So it is with faith -- it grows strong with use and it dies with disuse. And the use for which faith was primarily designed was what? A new life of joyful obedience. Just read chapter 11 -- By faith Abel offered a sacrifice. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abraham went out not knowing where he was to go. By faith Moses chose ill-treatment with the people of God.

The organ of faith is designed to empower joyful obedience. And so if we want the organ to grow strong -- if we want to realize full assurance of hope -- we must exercise it. If God says don't lie on your income tax form, then we must put faith to work and trust that God will meet all our needs as we obey him. If God says, flee fornication, then we must put our faith to work, and trust God that life will be fuller and relationships deeper and eternity sweeter because I have been obediently chaste.

And so it goes. If you exercise your faith it will be strengthened. Your moral faculties will be well trained in distinguishing good and evil. You will make progress toward maturity. And the full assurance of hope will make you ready for the toughest routines your coach may ever push you to try.