



Acts 2:42-47

How To Choose a Church: Perseverance

Summary: The early church was marked by seven key characteristics we should look for in a good church today.

Eugene Peterson once called the Christian life, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” People often have seasons of tremendous growth and activity in their spiritual life. We should be thankful for those seasons. We should ask God for the sense of personal revival they bring, but the reality is most of our lives are spent as the spiritual equivalent of working the night shift in God’s Kingdom - sweeping the floors, taking out the trash, stocking the shelves, and that’s OK. Spiritually healthy saints understand: we’re in this for the long haul.

One pastor recently explained it to his church this way:

“Friends, do you realize how vital it is to gather here together on the Lord’s Day, Sunday after Sunday? ... You’re here today—but your presence ... is not just for today. It’s for five years from now. Twenty years from now. It’s for a time when you may find yourself alone in a cancer ward; or isolated from Christian fellowship in a desolate place; or in prison for your faith; or in terrible turmoil within your soul; or alone at home, in the middle of the night, after you’ve buried your loved one in the ground.

You cultivate the means of grace today for sustenance you may need way down the road.

[...] The good seed of God’s Word is being planted in the soil of your heart, and it will bear fruit in its season, just when you need it.

That’s why we meditate on the teachings of God in Scripture day and night. That’s why we gather in the house of God with the people of God week by week. We don’t do it just for the immediate benefit. We take the long view. We cultivate these rhythms of grace, we practice these disciplines of worship, so that when the years of drought come, we will remember... And the very remembrance will sustain us.”¹

To that I only want to say, Amen. We have said similar things here many times. We are planting today what we will harvest tomorrow. It’s a process, not just a moment. When you think about saving for the future, you don’t focus on each individual dollar you tuck away. When you’re seeking physical fitness it’s not about each individual workout; you’re seeking the cumulative affect of money saved over time or fitness achieved and maintained through countless workouts. It’s true with your studies and with music too – there is value in each practice session, value in each lecture or class, but it’s the cumulative affect you’re

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/go-church-even-dont-feel-like/>

after – the results of a long effort, a long obedience, in the same direction. Most of the things worth having in life come through sustained pursuit, from perseverance.

Recently we have been looking at seven elements of a healthy church. We find all seven of these present in the early church and they are present in some form, in every healthy church today. They are:

1. Prayer
2. Preaching and teaching
3. Praise
4. The Power of God
5. Unity
6. Service
7. Perseverance

We see all of this when we read about the early church here in

Acts 2:42 And they [the early Church] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Now, we have to remember something here – they **continued daily** because of the special circumstances they were under – we talked about this last week – many of them were from out of town, so they were staying with each other as guests and visitors. “**Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house**” wasn’t a long-term situation. But [continuing] **steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers** was. And it’s something we can, and should, actually must maintain.

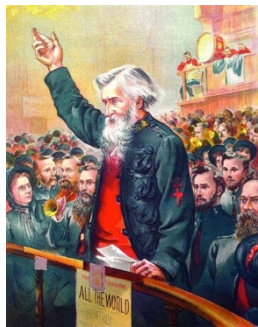
Earlier this year I read through the entire New Testament looking, specifically, for what it had to say about churches – what do they have to do, and what do they have to avoid? And I found things you would expect like: worship God, evangelize the lost, care about the poor and needy, and all of that was there. But there was also this constant theme of the need to persevere – in Christian doctrine and in the Christian life.

It’s there in the gospels, it’s there in the letters of Paul and Peter and John, it’s there in Revelation, the very last book of the Bible, go review Jesus’ letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. It’s pretty hard to ignore.

It’s also pretty hard to ignore the importance of persevering in the faith when you just look

around today. We see churches that were once fierce in their stance for the faith now wandering and weak. You see colleges and institutions that were founded by Christian people on Christian principles now completely secularized or Christian in name only.

Does anyone remember that the YMCA was the Young Men's Christian Association? Or that the game of basketball was invented there, in the YMCA, in 1891 by a Presbyterian pastor, as way to keep rowdy young men busy indoors during the cold winter months?



Does anyone remember that long before they ran thrift stores the Salvation Army was actually established to preach the gospel? William Booth, their founder – offered needy souls “Soup, Soap, and Salvation.” Do you know the Salvation Army still runs their own churches?

Very, very few people think about the YMCA, or Basketball, or even the Salvation Army in those terms any more – they have become, at least to the public, something different than what they began. You see – here's the problem – it's easy for people to focus on what's happening now and forget why things were started. We take foundations for granted and soon, they're forgotten entirely – which is why we must persevere.

What about the people you know who were once on fire for the Lord? People that came with you to church or summer camp, or took you to church, and now you look over and their life is a mess. Or maybe it's in your own life – you're here this morning, or you're listening in, and you know your relationship with Christ is not what it once was. Why does something so eternal, so soul-transforming, so life-changing, so explosive, also seem so fragile and faded and distant at times?

Why do we need this constant reminder to persevere, to endure, to [continue steadfastly](#)? Because, lest we forget, Christian experience is called *salvation* for a reason – we are being saved FROM something: the natural drift that all things have away from God. We call it sin. When we are saved, our soul is redeemed, but we still face resistance, temptation, and weakness in at least three forms: Satan, Society, and Self.

This morning we'll cover each of those, and then we'll talk about what perseverance produces and how we can find strength for the long obedience and the steady, enduring, patient, plod toward our Heavenly Home.

The first form of resistance in the Christian life is Satan and the forces at his command. This seems quaint and cartoonish to the modern mind, but the majority of people alive on the planet today, and who have lived throughout time understand - there is a very real force of personal evil at work in the world.

The Scriptures tell us Satan was behind the trials Job endured, and Jesus told Peter that

Satan desired to sift him like wheat (Luke 22:31).

Peter later told Christians specifically:

1 Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. **9** Resist him, steadfast in the faith...

If you grew up around the church you've heard of the Armor of God – it's a classic piece of children's ministry and the occasional sermon series or retreat theme. It comes from

Ephesians 6:10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. **12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. **13** Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

In other words, there is a real spiritual enemy, he is actively working against you and the things and people you love, and you need to actively resist him by turning to God for guidance, strength, wisdom, and victory. If you feel like the good things you are trying to do in your life are being opposed – maybe they really are. And you need to take up the whole armor of God, and withstand evil. That is a very real call to arms for some of you this morning. You need to take up the sword, strap on the armor, and withstand spiritual forces of evil. This is God's message to you. Do it.

There is another source of opposition you will face in life, something else you will have to endure and that is the effects and opinions of society, or what we call community and culture. American Christians, of all people, need to remember, that when Jesus came to save the world, they arrested Him, slandered Him, mocked, beat, and ultimately murdered Him by manipulating political power for their own gain. He lived in a country where the local political leader had John the Baptist Beheaded – it would be the equivalent of the Governor of Virginia putting Billy Graham in the electric chair, only more gruesome.

Remember that in Acts 2 we're looking at a church that was formed after Peter preached a sermon that ended with a call in Acts 2:40 for his listeners to "**Be saved from this perverse generation.**"

The whole culture was filled with immorality and violence, it wasn't just individuals, here and there. Greece and Rome produced tremendously influential art, philosophy, and political ideas but their cities and society were full of injustice, violence, and sexual misconduct and some of it crept into the church, just like we see happen today, only worse.

Paul had to address the issue of a young man having sexual relations with his own step mom in one of the early churches in Corinth, a city in Greece – and again, that was happening IN the church and people knew about it! This says nothing about what was

happening outside the church at the local temples and bathhouses and coliseums.

It was this culture that arrested and eventually martyred most of the apostles. Stephen, one of the first deacons, suffered the same fate – we'll see that in Acts 6. And yet, the gospel still advanced, it turned the world upside down.

So look - if God can save in that atmosphere, He can save anyone, anywhere and turn us around. In fact, history is the story of people turning away from God who then sends miraculous revivals calling people back to him. It begins in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and rolls through the Old Testament, into the New, down the long hallway of Church History until it arrives with us here today with us and these cycles will continue to roll until Christ finally returns and ends it once and for all.

So, we ask *why it is so hard to persevere in the faith?* And we see that there is Satanic opposition and there is the fact that we live in a society of fallen people with twisted desires, no matter how civilized they appear to be. But of course, the problem is not always external. We also fight the enemy within – the third obstacle is self – and we feel it in three ways: through duration, disappointment, and distraction.

First, duration. Let's just be honest, most people don't want to run a mile, much less a 5 or a 10k, yet God is calling you to run an ultra-marathon spiritually: to persevere, to endure, to continue steadfastly. Under ideal conditions, your walk with Him is a relationship and lifestyle that lasts longer than your relationship with your parents or even your spouse. Again, ideally, this is a path you start walking before you start working and keep walking after you retire. It's a long haul. And there's an awful lot we endure along the way. You may have had some very exciting seasons in your spiritual life, but faithfulness is found in the small things. And God is calling most of us to live, small, quiet, lives, full of faith and faithfulness, full of family and friends, full of love and service, and little things done well consistently over time. That's life, and that's OK. But it's a long duration.

And along the way, you're going to face some disappointments. Some tremendous disappointments. You're going to face death, and disease, and disasters. You're going to face depravity and disability, injustice and abuse, you're going to see and feel pain, and hatred, and hurt. And you're going to be discouraged and depressed by it all or you're going to go into a flying rage because "this is not the way it's supposed to be!" And you're right.

You're right.

It's not.

It's sin.

And that's what Christ came to save us from. And you get that, but you don't understand why He hasn't. Why didn't He stop this? Why did He allow this? Why is this still going on? And you may, or you may not, ever get your reasons. But it won't change much. It was still

wrong. It is still wrong. It's sin and the effects of a world and it's residents rebelling against God. You can either be saved from it, or go down with it. Your choice. I wish I could change it. God knows I would. But I can't. I can just encourage you to keep going. Never give up in the dark what you were so sure of in the light. Persevere. Endure. Jesus is the same – run to the Psalms and find balm for your soul when you are faced with disappointment.

But it's hard to do that, because there's distraction too. Along the way you will see a lot bright shiny things in the distance and squirrels darting across your path. Things that distract you, things that promise more excitement or adventure, things that promise more fulfillment – things you will one day regret. And you will either come to your senses, repent, and return to the ancient path, or you'll go deeper into the woods trying to find another trail, trying the next new thing that distracts you from persevering in what was, and is, and always will be right.

Satan, society, and self all serve to distract us from the long obedience. But those who persist and endure, can expect: growth, blessing and assurance themselves and find they become a source of encouragement for others.

Endurance and perseverance teach you things you would not learn in others ways, especially if you endure in the face of difficulty.

James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

It's true in physical training and it's true for your soul - resistance develops strength. You challenge your muscles with exertion. They tear, and you recover, and they heal, and they grow additional tissue to adapt. So too spiritually, challenges and trials come your way, or you endure over the long distance, and you find yourself growing stronger.

That strength comes in the form of blessings.

James 1:12 Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Ultimately, the strength and blessings of perseverance combine to give us an increasing assurance of our salvation. In other words, the benefits we receive from persevering are the fuel that enables us to keep persevering.

Listen to what Peter later writes. He tells Christians they have been born again through the power and work of God and look forward to “**an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for**” them (1 Peter 1:4).

1 Peter 1:6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you

have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of *your* souls.

A steady walk with Christ through the daily struggles of life on a fallen planet full of imperfect people can be wearying, discouraging, distracting, and painful, but if we persist, if we persevere, if we endure, our faith is tested and strengthened, it's proven genuine. The long obedience is proof of our love for God and His love for us and the result is joy, *joy inexpressible, full of glory*.

So, strength, blessing, and assurance – these are all benefits we receive, but our perseverance, our steadfastness also becomes an encouragement to others.

I grew up in Southern California, and on several occasions I had the chance to go to Disneyland. Disneyland is different than Disneyworld, because it's in the city and as a kid it's not so obvious where you are. And so we would be driving to the park and there was always a competition for who could see the Matterhorn first. If you saw the Matterhorn, you knew you were almost there.



Christian, when you stand firm in the faith, you become a landmark in people's lives. They know you, they trust you, they know what you signal and stand for. They're excited or encouraged when they see you, because they know what that means. You remind them of what lies ahead, and there's comfort in that. Your persistence in the faith is a landmark they navigate by and that encourages them.



So, what sustains us on the long journey, during the long wait for all of God's promises to be fulfilled? The answer is: God, others, and you.

The Christian life consists of applying the same basic truth to increasingly complex circumstances over and over again. Our lives and our circumstances change, our culture changes, but God does not. He is eternal. And we need to remember that- the same God that was there the last time you needed Him is still there:

Hebrews 13:8 *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

And He says things like:

Ps 50:15 *Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.*

Of course, sometimes He sends us that deliverance and help in the form of other Christians. We are encouraged by the stories of saints who have gone before us. Or, we see and hear the testimony of the generation just ahead of us and draw from their example. And sometimes, it's the people immediately around us, in our own lives. We gain strength from knowing we're all in this together, all stumbling in the same direction, one foot in front of the other, one day at time, making the long journey to our eternal home.

Along the way we find strength in healthy local churches where we
pray to God,
hear preaching about God, and
praise God together,
depending on His power.
That shared experience fills us with a sense of unity
compelling us to help and serve one another.

In other words, the elements of a healthy church community help us persevere, and I promise, promise, promise you this – there is a correlation between the health and strength of your soul and your connection to a persevering church. We are stronger together, and we have greater endurance together, than we ever could apart.

And yet, ultimately, it all comes back to each of us individually. We stand before God together, but we also stand before Him alone. And so we must choose individually, to stay committed to the basics. Even during the dry spells when the feelings aren't there. Stay in the Word, stay in fellowship, force yourself to pray.

There are cycles, there are chapters, there are seasons of life – but you start to recognize some patterns as you persevere. Those who remain committed to the long obedience have seen and know that what you harvest in the beauty of summer is often planted in the barrenness of spring.



So let me end with this, an encouragement from Paul to early Christians who also struggled to walk the long road:

Gal 6:9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. **10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Let's pray.