

Foundations for Endurance FCC 1-24-21

Well if ever a Christian worker had reasons to quit, it was Paul at the time he wrote 2Co. He was in his mid-fifties and had over 20 years of tough ministry experience behind him. Paul's first letter to Corinth was probably written at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8). Shortly after writing it, he was forced to flee because of the hubbub caused by the shrine makers honoring the goddess Diana (Acts 19). Paul went on to Troas to revisit churches in Macedonia. He intended to travel south to Corinth and visit churches in Achaia (Acts 20:1-2) He did eventually get there and stayed about three months (Acts 20:3). It was in the interval between leaving Ephesus and reaching Corinth that he wrote again to the Corinthians. At the time he was going through deep struggles. What he was going through was enough to make any Christian give up.

What was he facing? No news from Titus (2 Cor. 2:13). He had sent Titus to Corinth to deal with some of the problems there. He was anxious about what was happening there. He describes this time in Macedonia as a time when he had *no rest within and deeply troubled from without* as well. The church at Corinth appeared to be in revolt against his leadership. The churches in Galatia were falling away to another Gospel. He had narrowly escaped with his life from the uproar in Ephesus. In addition to disappointment and apprehensiveness, Paul had a physical illness which was almost fatal. Paul described it in his own words,

2Co 1:8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

2Co 1:9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

It probably would not be too strong to say Paul was depressed. His death felt imminent. Paul was in deep trouble. But look at what he learned.

2Co 1:10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

2Co 1:11 You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Paul recognizes an important dynamic. *Transparency allows others to identify with you, pray more fervently for you, and pray with understanding.* Then, God receives much more praise and honor because many are partnering with Him. Prayer backers make a big difference in our lives if we share openly with them. If fear holds us back from being open, we miss out on one of God's greatest resources for us.

When we acknowledge our total dependence on God in the midst of trials we reach a turning point. Paul was at death's door. To all outward appearances his life and work were coming to an end—and not on a good note. His life, his work, and the fate of the worldwide movement of Christianity in the Gentile world all seemed to hang in the balance. Probably never before had he felt himself so helpless, so beaten down, as he was on that journey from Ephesus to Macedonia. He was laid up sick, death felt near, and he awaited Titus, not even sure he would last long enough to see Titus. And Titus came.

But the news was not all good. For whatever Titus shared prompted another letter to Corinth. Paul's apostolic authority was in question and with it the whole of the future ministry to the Gentiles. If Paul ever felt like quitting, this Corinthian thing was top of the list for quitting time. If he wasn't gray headed before I am sure he had gray hairs after this thing.

Although this was Paul's hardest hour, this was Paul's finest hour. His trials showed his true nature. How did Paul not give up?

Four foundations of Paul's endurance in ministry. Each of these reasons involve both human and divine elements in the sense that God provides and Paul cooperates. Each of these reasons Paul persevered really represent the values that formed the foundation for Paul's spiritual life.

First, he had a sense of life purpose.

Act 20:24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Course, used three times in the N.T., refers to life's purpose, the pathway set before one to do, that leads to a destiny. Paul's life was tightly integrated, that is, extremely focused around a solid life purpose. A life purpose could be defined as a burden-like calling, a task or driving force or goal which motivates a Christian. This is the core focal point around which a life is integrated over a lifetime. Paul's attitude is God gave me this life purpose, God called me to this, God put me in this. Therefore, I am not going to quit. God has given me this ministry and I am going to see it through as a good steward.

Reflect on what your purpose is- the ministry God has given you. That may include something you do within or for the church, but it may also be, and hopefully is, something you do with or for others outside the church and its events. You can have a ministry within your family, your occupation, your civic involvements. You can represent Christ and serve Christ and others as an act of worship to God and as a blessing to people. That's ministry. And my prayer is that we integrate that understanding of ministry into how we think about our life purpose.

Second, he was Disciplined to finish well.

1Co 9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

1Co 9:25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

1Co 9:26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.

1Co 9:27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Verse 25: The word translated as *Exercises self-control* (SRN 1467) means to practice discipline to the point of agony. It described athletes

who were preparing for the Olympic Games. Such an athlete abstained from unhealthy food and lifestyles.

Paul is encouraging the spiritual disciplines that help Christians finish well. Effective Christians are disciplined Christians. Spiritual disciplines, such as study, prayer, worship, fellowship, will need to be applied with purpose in order to continue toward the finish. May Christians only grow to a certain point, and then they plateau. Spiritual disciplines are needed in order to grow past that point. Paul was aware that many did not make it- they did not finish well. Paul was also aware that Christians are at risk of reaching a point where they plateau, whether in their spiritual life or in their ministry. He didn't want that. So he did something about it. He implemented greater discipline in his life. We each have to ask ourselves- are we actively growing, or have we plateaued? And what will we do to start growing again?

Third, he counted on the grace of God.

A reason Paul profited spiritually from his trials and made it through was that he opened his heart to the grace of God. Peter, John, Paul are the three great Christian leaders at the beginning of the church. All three knew this under girding principle. Their final words confirm it.

2Pe 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Rev 22:21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all (God's people). Amen.

2Ti 4:22 The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

Peter, John, and Paul didn't just use the word 'grace' to make nice, spiritual-sounding conclusions to their letters. And they are writing to people who are already believers, so they are not talking about the grace that initially saves you. It is interesting how each of them came to the same inescapable conclusion. You will not make it in the Christian life without grace. Now grace as described here is not referring specifically to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteous

standing before God that we receive when we put faith in him. This type of grace is something we receive from God beyond what we receive in salvation. It is referring to an enabling and inspiring energy of God and presence of God in a person's life which encourages that person to persevere in victory throughout life's circumstances. So Paul did not take lightly what Jesus told him in

2Co 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Friends, we will not make it through trials apart from knowing and counting upon this grace. And when we understand that grace and its power, we will understand why it is all-sufficient.

Fourth, he had a strong Sense Of Destiny.

Paul had a sense of destiny- that he would receive a heavenly reward for being dedicated to the purpose God gave him. And that destiny focused his life and enabled him to make it through trials. Notice his triumphant finish.

2Ti 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

2Ti 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2Ti 4:8 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.

Paul had a particular attitude about trials which made all the difference in his life and ministry. One author calls this a *Sovereign Mindset*. A sovereign mindset is an attitude in which one sees God's working in the events and circumstances that shapes one's life, whether those were good or bad. Christians ought to see God's hand in their circumstances as part of His plan for developing them in spiritual depth, character, and service. The same author calls these events or circumstances through which God works in our lives 'shaping

activities'. Paul tended to see God's purposes in these shaping activities and then could align himself with God's purpose so that he could not only be content within them, but also make the best of them by integrating them into his understanding of his life purpose and his destiny.

Conclusion

When you assemble the biblical evidence about Paul, all seven characteristics of a good finish are seen: (1) vibrant personal relationship with God; (2) have a learning posture; (3) Christ-likeness in character; (4) live by Biblical convictions; (5) leave behind ultimate contributions or legacy; (6) fulfill a calling or purpose; (7) experience destiny.

Trials are not pleasant. They may involve physical suffering, or persecution, or conflict, or crises in life. But if we are following Christ, they will come because that is the nature of the Christian life. It will lead us into trials. Two common reactions to trials:

Drift away from God. In the midst of a trial, in the midst of unanswered questions that come with trials, a person can develop the attitude of 'well, if this is the way God is I don't need or want God.' You could start thinking along the lines of 'well, the kind of God that would let this happen to me is not the kind of God I want anything to do with.' The development of this attitude toward God usually doesn't happen fast; it happens slow, as life wears us down. Unfortunately, this is the direct result of a shallow spirituality that sees God as a cosmic vending machine and fails to thoroughly integrate God's purpose for your life into your own purpose for your life. In the midst of trials, shallow spirituality will lead us into a tailspin of utter spiritual confusion because we don't have a solid foundation under us. Shallow spirituality will not make you triumphant in trials.

Go deep with God. Please realize that if you are going to turn toward God in trials, it will require you to go deep with God. You will have to go deeper with God in order to understand God's character and

purposes in a way that views trials as the shaping activity of God. You will have to go deeper with God in order to integrate God's purpose for your life into your own purpose for your life. You will have to go deeper with God in order to get through trials in a way that is faithful to God, in a way that makes you stronger and inspires others.

Please also realize that if you are going to go deep with God in trials, you can't wait until trials come to decide how you will approach them. In trials you most likely will not be able to think clearly. Decide now, as an act of the will, that when trials come, you will go deep with God. And go deep with God now, as a preparation for the trials that will come.

Trials will test your belief in the sufficiency of Christ. But God will meet you in your trials. He will use them to shape you in a way that helps you fulfill the purpose he has given you and gain a heavenly reward. Your own development through trials gives hope that those who notice your life can also know the sufficiency of Christ in their trials. Your life will be a model for others to follow. Let us pray.

Benediction: 2 Peter 3:18