

SESSION 5: BUILDING PERSEVERANCE

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In Luke 21:24-36, Jesus uses one of his last times with the disciples to warn them of the struggles.

34 Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. 35 For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. (emphasis added.)

In this video, Andrew noticed that the sins mentioned—partying, drunkenness, the anxieties of life, a heavy heart—come on the people of God *"suddenly like a trap."*

When pressures come, we may not see them coming. We can be so entwined with pleasure seeking that the trap catches us unaware. Pleasure can be defined as, "A source of enjoyment or delight taken for amusement, diversion, or worldly enjoyment." Perhaps in the hope of a temporary escape or diversion, Christians will buy into a godless value statement of America, a lie from the pit:

"You, and your happiness, are most important!"

The lie of self-focus. We see it all around us, in movies, songs, and advertisements. "You deserve a break today"—from fast food. "Choose happiness"—it is inside a soft drink. "Walk tall"—get worth from a larger credit line. Andrew suggests that "the pursuit of pleasure or self-fulfillment is for many people their controlling value." A good friend paid for an upgrade on a long flight for Cathy and me. I may never be able to sit in the dungeon trusses of economy again.

Science, medicine, and psychology all agree: pleasure is both addictive and distracting.

During the days of suffering ahead, some Christians will run away to pleasures to try to avoid the full costs. They might binge shop on Amazon. They might drink too much. They will change their words and ways to have a good relationship with society, in hopes of avoiding pain or conflict. They will simply do whatever is asked of them to take care of themselves and their families. But notice what Luke 21 above says, *"For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth."* Ultimately, there is no place to hide. *"All those"* living on *"the whole earth."* There is no way to just "get along" without renouncing Jesus. Even that won't be enough. Therefore Jesus, who knows exactly what is

Andrew's Keys from Session 5

- MORE PRONOUNCED IN AMERICAN VALUES
- NOT WHAT I FEEL BUT WHAT JESUS WANTS
- BUILD PERSEVERANCE
- A DECISION OF OUR WILL
- A PERSISTENT DECISION
- BUILDS SOMETHING IN ME
- LEARNING TO PERSEVERE
- BE FAITHFUL IN THE SMALL THINGS

"There is no man upon the earth who isn't earnestly seeking after happiness, and it appears abundantly by the variety of ways they so vigorously seek it; they will twist and turn every way, ply all instruments, to make themselves happy men."

■ Jonathan Edwards,
1720

coming, wants his beloved people to *“be able to stand before the Son of Man.”* The only escape is to be securely with Christ and protected by our faith.

The life of faith is built not on what I feel, but on what Jesus wants.

THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS

You may ask, “Doesn’t God want me to be happy?” Well, ultimately, God is working for eternal happiness in our lives. And there are many blessings and joys we have been given in this life. But happiness is not promised in the Bible for our lives in this world and is never one of Jesus’ core values. He knows that our experience in life is always mixed. *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33). Peace comes—but not from having relief from hardships. Peace comes despite difficulties; we take heart by focusing on Jesus and his ultimate victory.

When Jonathan Edwards was 18 years old, he preached his first sermon, entitled, *Christian Happiness*. It was a reflection on Isaiah 3:10, *“Say unto the righteous, it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.”* The thesis of the sermon was simple, and powerful: **Christians should be happy.**

Why should Christians be happy? For Edwards, it was not about circumstances, but rooted in three eternal truths:

1. **Our bad things will turn out for good.**
2. **Our good things can never be taken away from us.**
3. **The best things are yet to come.**

Our real happiness and security are in heaven.

A DECISION TO PERSEVERE

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” *“An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”* (Luke 22:42-44)

LEARNING FROM ETHIOPIA

The gospel was first brought to Ethiopia in the first century, and Ethiopia has a Christian majority. Freedom of religion is guaranteed under Ethiopian law, and the national government generally works to protect the rights of Christians.

None-the-less, many Ethiopian Christians still face persecution today. “The rise of other religions and recent political unrest have created opportunities for large attacks on Christians and churches throughout the country... Many believers have been killed. Still, evangelical churches in Ethiopia continue to plant new churches and send missionaries to difficult areas.”

■ Voice of the Martyrs,
2022

“While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”

■ Timothy Keller

The journey to the cross required great persistence, even for Jesus. Even an angel could not remove the grief and agony. Yet he did not quit. **His only surrender was to God's will.**

Jesus' example should once again shout to us about persistence: *"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* (Heb. 12:2-3).

For Jesus, perseverance included a decision of choice to relinquish his will to God's will. As Christians, we follow his example.

In prison, isolated and unsettled, Andrew was forced to the breaking point. There, he had to make a choice. Quit or press into Jesus. His answer came at a cost, without relief. It was his decision point: "Jesus, I will run after you, no matter how I feel. And if I can't run, then I will crawl."

Remember this truth: **The life of faith is built not on what I feel, but on what Jesus wants.**

What if Jesus has a good plan that requires his people to go through persecution? What if Jesus wants our holiness and refining more than our happiness? Could it be that what Jesus desires comes at a cost for us? Could suffering make the people of God more like Jesus?

Perseverance is grown in the daily, repeated process of surrendering to God's will.

Perseverance, like all resolutions, is not a once-for-all decision. It is birthed in doggedness and determination, one moment at a time, one step at a time. Sometimes the words come as echoes of faith, sometimes as whispers in exhaustion, and other times with dancing in obedience—"Your will, not mine!" Perseverance requires continual surrender to God's plan.

Perseverance builds something in us. Maturity and holiness come at a cost, it seems. God orchestrates places where we can learn to persevere and grow up. Difficulties can force us to trust God more. Consider the wanderings of Israel. The exile of David. The prison time of Joseph. James 1 notes that perseverance is a process, starting with *"trials of many kinds,"* then moving into

LEARNING FROM CANADA

Since July 2005, when the courts redefined marriage in the Canadian state, a steady stream of criminal and administrative law has been used to penalize Christians for their beliefs.

In 2018, Trinity Western University, an evangelical university in British Columbia, lost its battle in Canada's Supreme Court to open its law school, after some Canadian law societies objected that the university was discriminatory. This was for asking students to agree to respect the Biblical view of human sexuality and to abstain from sexual relations other than heterosexual marriage during school involvement. While the Supreme Court recognized that its final ruling violated religious freedom, it argued that it was 'proportionate and reasonable' to do this to ensure access to the University for self-identifying LGBTQ students.

In early 2022, the Canadian legislature made it a criminal act to try to use conversion therapy to change a person's sexual orientation. The bill undermines Christian beliefs that people are created male and female, stating such beliefs are, "based on and propagate myths and stereotypes about sexual orientation and gender identity, including the myth that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity can and ought to be changed."

■ Christian Concern, 2022.

perseverance, and finally perseverance finishes in maturity. Skip the heat and you miss the finished, perfected and tempered steel. Sadly, if we fail to gain perseverance, we also may give up our faith, or be trapped in immaturity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Where do you see the cultural battle for our hearts and minds? Where in you?
- 2) Look at Jonathan Edward's three truths, above. How do these result in a Christian's happiness? Which is hardest for you to grasp or believe?
- 3) Living in this decision: "not what I feel but what Jesus wants" is hard. How do we do it?

ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Reflect on a time you endured something hard. An examination, a sporting event, a relocation, a loss? What skills did you need? What helped you through?
- ✓ Talk to a friend about what you have learned from life about the skills necessary to endure dark times. And listen to their thoughts, too.
- ✓ Pray, "Father, strengthen my inner man with endurance, that I may do your will with zeal and diligence. Direct my heart into the endurance and love in which Jesus walked. Give me strength to fulfill all your purposes for me, and to live free of compromise that I would walk blamelessly in body, soul, and spirit, and be able stand before you victorious, in full obedience. Amen."

"Christianity doesn't deny the reality of suffering and evil. Remember after Jesus came down the Mount of Transfiguration, He told His disciples that He was going up to Jerusalem—that He would be executed and that He would triumph over death. Jesus was not the least bit confident that He would be spared suffering. He knew that suffering was necessary. What He was confident of was vindication.

Our hope, our acceptance of the invitation to the banquet, is not based on the idea that we are going to be free of pain and suffering. Rather it is based on the conviction that we will triumph over suffering....

Christian hope stands firm and serene, confident even in the face of the gas chamber, even in the face of terminal cancer. However serious we believe Good Friday is, we are confident that Easter Sunday lies ahead of us. And what if we do die? Jesus died too, and if Jesus died we believe that now He lives, and that we shall live too."

■ Brennan Manning,
The Ragamuffin Gospel

FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—DEMAS, LACKING SPIRITUAL ENDURANCE

In AD 60-62, the Apostle Paul is imprisoned in Rome. A Roman citizen, he is under guarded "house arrest" and is allowed visitors. In the last chapter of Colossians (Col. 4:7-15) there are at least eight believers with Paul who are mentioned. Six of them send their greetings to the churches in the Colossae valley (Col. 4:10-14), five of them will send their personal greetings to Philemon at

Colossae as well (Phil. 23, 24). Two other brothers, Tychicus and Onesimus, will take the letters back to Paul's recipients (Col. 4:7-9). John Mark (the writer of Mark's Gospel), and Dr. Luke (the writer of Luke and Acts) are with Paul. We meet a new person, Demas, who is listed as being with Paul, too (Col. 4:14).

Two gospel writers are obviously helping while detailing Paul's accounts. But the greetings provide little about Demas. He is listed with the Greeks, Luke and Epaphras, in contrast to the three Jewish believers, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus. This seems to indicate that Demas was a Gentile believer working in ministry with Paul.

Demas is also listed in Philemon 23-24, where he is a fellow laborer with Paul:

"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers."

The word "fellow worker" (in Greek, *sunergos*) has the idea of a teammate and co-worker. One Greek scholar writes that the "word implies that two people are working closely together as partners, sharing work and responsibility. There is even the suggestion of equality in the word co-worker... Demas was a close confidant of Paul, sharing the Apostle's vision of winning the world for God."

In 2 Timothy 4:9-10, we find one final mention of Demas. It is a tragic one.

"Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica."

The word Paul uses for Demas' love here is *agape*, enduring love. Paul does not tell us what aspect of the present world system Demas loved. It might be money, or comfort, or family. It could be a fear that he, too, would be identified with Paul in persecution. Notice that Paul does not vilify nor attack him. He does not rage against his weakness. Without going into detail, Paul (under the leading of the Spirit) simply offers Demas' life as a warning to potential wayward believers. And to us. Perhaps Demas never really believed or will be saved as one through the fire (1 Cor. 3:15). Still, we are left with a warning: some "Christians" fall away, at least from our perspective. Using the same word, *agape*, John wrote to believers in Asia. It is a stern reminder.

"Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-1).