

# Paradoxical Promises Produce Perseverance

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So here's a question for you. What gives you confidence to keep going? When things are difficult, how do you continue? How do you persevere? I think there's a variety of possible answers to that question, but I think the chief one is hope. Hope is what enables us to persevere.

Hope that it won't always be the way it is right now. Confidence that one day things will be better. The mother in labour, she perseveres through the pain because she knows she'll have a baby at the end.

You keep walking through the dark tunnel because you see the light ahead. You keep running the race because you have your eye on the prize. I think that's what's going on here as Paul writes to Timothy. In this second chapter, he's calling Timothy to be willing to suffer. The first six verses, he demonstrates, he illustrates that suffering is a normal element of the Christian faith. He points to the examples of the soldier and the athlete and the farmer. And then from verse eight onwards, he offers examples of suffering. He begins with Jesus. He continues on to himself.

And now from verse 11 that we're focusing on today, he points to common Christian experience. Verses 11 to 13 focus on the common Christian experience of suffering because suffering is normal.

But as he points here to that common experience, he gives reasons for hope. Reasons to persevere. He makes promises, or rather he reminds people of God's promises. And these promises should produce hope. And that hope should enable perseverance. And since some of these promises seem somewhat the opposite of what you would expect, we have the title, paradoxical promises produce perseverance.

[ 1 : 5 2 ] Paradoxical promises produce perseverance. Recognising that the outcome of perseverance in the midst of suffering will be the opposite of what one might first think. That should encourage Timothy. It should produce hope for him and for his church and for us 2,000 years later. I pray that that will be the result for us as we consider verses 11 to 13 together this morning. So first up, if we died with him, we will also live with him. This is the first promise here in verse 11. Now, pretty sure that Paul is not talking here about physical death. I think it would be very strange to start this sequence of promises with physical death since after that point, well, there's no longer any opportunity for endurance or to disown or to be faithless for that matter. The idea here then is closer to what Paul talks about in Romans chapter 6, where he uses almost exactly the same phrase in verse 8. If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. In the first part of Romans 6, Paul makes it clear that the death he's talking about there is baptism. He says we were baptised into Jesus' death. And in Romans 6, the big point that he's making is that in that death we died to sin. Verse 2, he says it makes no sense for

Christians to sin anymore because we've died to sin. That's the focus in Romans 6. Here in his second letter to Timothy, I think Paul's talking about the same death but focusing on a different consequence of it. He's talking about our participation in Christ's death. And for Christians, this is a past event. This has been and done. We died with him. This is not a future event. This is not kind of possible martyrdom somewhere off in the distance. No, this is the past death, the death of baptism, of being united with Christ in his death.

However, I think martyrdom is actually still in view here. Not in the sense of having already experienced it. Not in the sense of being dead already. But in the sense of being fully resigned to it. Having made peace with the possibility of it. And to all the afflictions that precede it.

One commentator paraphrases Paul's argument this way. He says, For Christ's sake, and in harmony with his example, we have given ourselves up, once for all, to a life that involves exposure to pain, torture, reproach, and finally to the martyr's death.

We have accordingly died to worldly comfort, ease, advantage, and honour. If then we have in that sense died with him, we shall also live with him. Here and now we will live with him, and even more by and by in heavenly glory. And especially after the judgment day in the new heaven and earth, we will live with him. So here is the paradox of the first promise. To die with Christ produces ultimately not death, but life. Paradoxes are interesting things, aren't they? Sometimes it's a fun puzzle.

[ 5 : 16 ] Sometimes two things can't be simultaneously true. Sometimes our eyes play tricks on us. That's what's going on in M.C. Escher's drawings that picture impossible objects and scenery. But sometimes it's a question of perspective. The Penrose Triangle. You can draw this on paper in 3D perspective, going round and round, but it can't actually exist as a three-dimensional object. It's not possible to build one. Although you can make it look like it exists when you look at it from just the right angle. It's a question of perspective. And sometimes a paradox causes you to re-examine what you thought you knew. Probably shouldn't have spent as much time this week as I did reading about Russell's paradox. You can go and read about it too if you like. This is an example of where a paradox, two things that can't be simultaneously true, and yet the result is true, where it causes you to question one of your underlying assumptions. And that's what we have here in Paul's letter to

Timothy. If we died with him, we will also live with him. It sounds like a paradox. It sounds like both things cannot be true. But that's because we assume that you can't die and be alive at the same time. Yet one of the core truths of the Christian faith is that we will, in fact, live again after we die. Jesus' resurrection that we celebrated last week, it proves that we too may be raised to life everlasting. And it's also true that we can die in this metaphorical sense and yet live. We can die to our own ambitions. We can die to a pursuit of health and wealth and well-being. We can die to a devotion to comfort and ease. And yet we can live in Jesus. Jesus who came and who said, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. Dying with Jesus results in life, not only life, but life to the full, the greatest possible life. If you have committed your life to Jesus, then you have died. And the paradoxical promise that produces our perseverance is that we live with him now and for eternity.

Now, as is so often the case in poetic passages in the Bible, the second line here parallels the first. It expresses the same idea, but with a different nuance, a shifted emphasis that develops and modifies the idea. If we endure, we will also reign with him. Now, again, it sounds backwards, doesn't it?

The person who endures, the person who suffers, well, that person has a difficult life. The person who even is persecuted for their faith, the one who, like Paul back in verse 10, endures everything for the sake of the elect, the one who is imprisoned for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his gospel. It is not intuitive that such a person would reign, is it? We don't think of kings and queens and presidents and prime ministers and first ministers for that matter. We don't typically think of them in the same breath as thinking of them enduring suffering, do we? But that's the reality in God's kingdom.

It is the ones who endure that are granted the crown. John's told to write in Revelation chapter 3 to the church at Laodicea, to the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my father on his throne. That the victory there in Revelation, that victory is in the sense of overcoming, of winning in the face of obstacles.

[ 9 : 19 ] The one who endures through the storms of life, that one, that person who overcomes, is the one who will have the right to sit on the throne. To the one who endures, sorry, if we endure, we will also reign with him.

And we do this, we do this in God's strength, not in our own. This endurance, this overcoming, doesn't depend primarily upon our own effort. But rather the apostle John writes in his first letter, everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Now, John writes that in the context of urging people to keep God's commands. This isn't an encouragement to sit back and think, it's all sorted, I can do as I please. This isn't license for laziness. But it is an assurance. It is a reassurance that our endurance, that our overcoming, that it depends only on our belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Nothing more. There may be times, there may be long periods where this feels like a hard slog. But the paradoxical promise that produces our perseverance is that slogging along in the paths of righteousness wins us the right to reign at the Father's side. Third line, if we disown him, he will also disown us.

Suddenly it's a lot less hopeful, isn't it? A lot less reassuring. But the intent is the same. The purpose of Paul's writing hasn't changed. The point is still to encourage perseverance.

But the means of that encouragement has shifted to a warning about the consequences should one not do so. Paul here is picking up language that Jesus himself used. This isn't just Paul making stuff up.

This is what Jesus said back in Matthew chapter 10. Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

[ 11 : 52 ] Now I think probably in what Jesus says there in Matthew chapter 10 and what Paul writes here to Timothy, I think it's probably words that are primarily in view. The question is whether we are happy to declare our faith before others, to admit it when somebody asks what we were doing on Sunday morning. There is another dimension too that comes through more strongly in Paul's letter to Titus.

There Paul says that there are those who claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good. There are those who refuse to be counted as belonging to Jesus in the here and now because they don't want to pay the cost.

They don't want the social ostracism or even in other countries, even today. They don't want to admit it because they don't want to be persecuted by the state or by individuals. Six leaders of the early rain covenant church were arrested on Easter Sunday by the Chinese authorities for participating in a Zoom church service. They were arrested for doing what we're doing right now.

There are places where it is dangerous to claim the name of Jesus. Places where it is surely very tempting to disown him because it's costly to do otherwise. But Paul here exhorts Timothy to bear up amid suffering, to face the cost head on, to be loyal to Jesus when it's difficult to do so.

We know those who refuse to be counted as belonging to Jesus. And the warning here is that Jesus will in turn disown such people. And we also know those who claim to be Christians, perhaps because it's convenient to do so. It keeps the grandparents happy to know that the kids are being baptized and being taken to Sunday school. Perhaps it's convenient to call yourself a believer. Or maybe you have loads of friends in the church and so you just play along. We know those who claim the name of Jesus and yet who show by their actions that he is not their Lord. Those who willfully and deliberately refuse to live according to his standards. And to them the warning here is the same. If we disown him, whether by our words or by our actions, he will also disown us. This second half of verse 12 is a solemn warning, isn't it?

[ 14 : 38 ] And let's be clear that this is fair. This is just. This is reasonable. If you disown somebody, they have no obligation to continue to acknowledge you, the husband or the wife who walks away from the marriage, they don't have the right to turn around later and demand anything, really. In refusing your responsibilities, you lose the privileges too. If we disown him, he will also disown us.

I guess that one's not really much of a paradox, is it? But this promise, this warning, it should still serve to produce perseverance. Verse 13 then brings the fourth promise of this set. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself. I mean, if anything is paradoxical, surely it's this.

Faithlessness produces faithfulness. However, there's a big question over this line. There's two possibilities for what Paul could be saying here. First option, if we are faithless, by which we mean if we disown and deny Jesus, if we commit apostasy, if we renounce Christ, if we are faithless, he will be faithful. He will be faithful in the sense that he will act in accordance with his character. He will be faithful to do as he has promised. He will be faithful to disown us, as the previous line said. That's option one for what Paul means here. Second option, if we're faithless, that is to say, if we temporarily fail to live up to our confession, if we don't perfectly and consistently speak and act as believers, if we waver a little bit in the face of persecution, he will remain faithful in that he will not let us go. He will preserve those who are his unto the very end. And this interpretation, this would match up with the example of the Apostle Peter, who famously denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. And yet Jesus was patient with him. And after his resurrection, Jesus restored Peter, and the book of Acts records his subsequent faithful service. So here we'd be saying that for the true believer united to Christ in those enduring bonds of the gospel covenant, that for them the occasional lapse into sin doesn't negate the Saviour's commitment to them. Yes, Jesus is grieved by the failures of his people, but his love for them endures. Jesus loves me even when I'm bad.

Now these two possibilities for what's going on here, these seem like two quite different statements, don't they? Is this a reassurance or is it a warning? Well, the good news here is, both of these things are clearly true. Scripture backs up both of these understandings. The first option matches up with the preceding line, and the second option is asserted in John chapter 10, verse 28. Jesus declares, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand, as well as being demonstrated by the example of Peter. So both these things are true.

We should believe both of these things. So on one level, I'm not greatly concerned which point you think Paul is making here. But he still is only trying to say one of these things at this point, so we should try and figure out what that is. On balance, I think probably his point is the first one. Think this fourth line is supposed to be parallel to the third line. Perhaps not so paradoxical after all.

[ 18 : 50 ] Now that's not to say that this is a simple repetition. This isn't just a duplication. It would be very clumsy language for that. But what this line adds is the point that this is what God's faithfulness looks like. So you don't get to complain that God is being unfair or inconsistent if he disowns you on the last day, after you disowned him, after you were faithless. Why?

Because you have been warned. You have been told that this will be the result. If you haven't been told before, well, Paul told you in the previous verse, and I'm telling you today. If you disown Jesus, he will disown you. If you do not welcome him as saviour and as Lord, he will not welcome you.

God is always consistent. God is always faithful. God always does as he said he will. God always keeps his promises. And this fact about God, this consistency of his character, this is a profound reassurance to those who have died with him, to those who endure in his service, lines one and two, because it promises life and an eternity reigning at his side. It is a profound reassurance and it is a gracious and merciful warning. It is a warning to those who might do otherwise, who are tempted to disown him or to be faithless. It is a warning of the consequences for that choice.

And so having considered these four lines, what we find is that they together convey one main thought, which is to say that loyalty to Christ, steadfastness amid persecution, commitment in his service, even to the point of death, even to the point of death, that such commitment is rewarded and that disloyalty is punished. Whether paradoxical or not, these promises are intended to produce perseverance.

The hope of the victor's crown spurs us on and the danger of an eternity without hope warns us away.

[ 21 : 35 ] Let's pray. Lord God, our heavenly Father, thank you for your word. Thank you that you show us your character. Thank you that you make great promises.

And that your recorded deeds through history show us that you always keep your promises. Now you always do as you have said. Lord, help us to value these promises made here in this letter to Timothy.

Help us have this confidence that having died with him, we will live with him. This confidence that as we endure, we will reign with him. And Lord, give us also the knowledge of these promises of what will result if we disown him, if we are faithless.

Lord, guard our hearts against these things. Impress upon us the seriousness of this revelation of your character in order that we might enjoy eternity with you.

Amen.