

Don't Throw in the Towel!

I have a friend who is a respected Christian leader. But like all of us, he wrestles with his own sins, weaknesses and trials. People associated with his ministry have disrespected him, his family has suffered, and he has struggled with health problems. He has also carried loads of shame since his childhood because of sexual abuse.

My friend recently admitted that he has occasionally asked God to take his life because he was so discouraged. When I prayed with him, I saw a vision of a huge arena. I could see athletes running while the crowd cheered, but my friend was sitting on a bench next to the track. Then I saw Jesus walk over to him, grab his arm and beckon him to get in the race.

My friend turned a spiritual corner after I shared this vision with him. His hope was renewed, and he decided to run the race of faith again. But there are many Christians today who have pulled out of the race because life got too tough. Some were instantly broadsided; others gradually slowed down until they quit.

The apostle Paul wrote to a group of people who were thinking of quitting the race. They were Jewish Christians who faced intense persecution. Using imagery of an athletic arena, Paul said to them: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

Are you sitting on the bench? Or are you out of breath because you are lugging 50 pounds of shame and failure? Have you disqualified yourself from the race? Here are five of the most common reasons Christians throw in the towel:

1. Depression or discouragement. When we face stress, tragedy,

disappointment, failure or prolonged delay, we will lose hope if we don't stay close to God and cling to His promises. We must remember that the darkness never lasts. "Weeping may last for the night," Psalm 30:5 says, "but a shout of joy comes in the morning."

Charles Spurgeon wrote: "There are no immortal sorrows for immortal saints. They come; but, blessed be God, they also go." No matter what obstacle you face, it will not stand in front of you indefinitely. No matter how heavy and dark the cloud is over your head, the sunshine will soon break through. Though you may not see a light at the end of the tunnel, you must keep pressing forward. You will outlast your problem.

2. Shame or self-loathing. The miracle of grace says all your past sins have been blotted out. If you have trusted in the blood of Christ, heaven has purged all record of your failures. Yet many Christians cannot forgive themselves for their weaknesses, and they imagine that God is still angry with them because they still struggle with temptation. And the devil is eager to remind us of what we once were!

Go back to the cross and give God your doubts, fears and shame. Stop punishing yourself. Trade your sinfulness for His righteousness. Jesus knows you cannot live a sinless life apart from Him—so He chose to live His perfect life through you.

3. Sinful habits. If you struggle with a life-controlling problem, you cannot overcome it alone. You must open your life to mature Christians and confess your weakness. Paul told the Hebrews: "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble" (Heb. 12:12). Athletes don't rehabilitate themselves—they ask for help. You cannot run the race when sin has crippled you. Be transparent and let the right people pray with you.

4. Distraction. The key to winning a race is focus. Paul

emphasized this when he told the Hebrews to fix their eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:2). Our focus cannot be on a pastor, a celebrity preacher, a pet doctrine, a church, a denomination, a political party, spiritual gifts or emotions. If you put your trust in any of those things, you will not be able to finish the race. It was Jesus who started His work in you, and only He will complete it.

Regaining your focus is not difficult. Simply set aside some time to pray, and cast your cares on the Lord. Read the Psalms. Listen to praise music. Spend time in God's Word each day. Spurgeon said: "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." If you soak your mind in Scripture, you will find unusual grace to press forward, even when all hell is raging against you.

5. Persecution. It's easy to serve God when everybody thinks you're wonderful. But how do you respond when family members and co-workers speak against you because of your faith or your moral convictions? Persecution can tempt us to deny Christ or to make moral compromises. But you must remember that when you suffer for His name's sake, you will be blessed. Peter said when we are persecuted, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:14).

I will tell you what I told my friend last week. Jesus is calling you back in the race. Don't just sit there and let the devil win. Put one foot in front of the other, focus on Jesus and trust Him to give you the strength to run. {eoa}