



Running the Race

HERE FOR THE
LONG HAUL

Alison Flynn

INTERVIEW:
BARBARA
COLLINS

Jenny Kemp

A STUDY IN
PERSEVERANCE

Deb Sugars

BOOK REVIEW:
HIDDEN SORROW,
LASTING JOY

Valerie Ting



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

How are you going in your Christian journey? Or to use the biblical image, how are you running the race these days? Does it feel like the 100 metre sprint, or is it more like heartbreak hill in the New York marathon?

As we've worked towards putting this issue together, I've paused to wonder about the many different people who will read it. Ishah readers cover many ages and stages of Christian experience. Some of you are in the early days of faith, some in the middle and some towards the end of the journey. Some have found it easy to believe and trust, while others have felt weighed down with burdens of doubt or struggle. I'm pretty sure all of us desire, as Paul did, to run the race well and right to the end. I hope each one of you finds encouragement here to continue the race with renewed energy and inspiration.

I'm very excited that our contributors have been so wise and willing to share personally with us on the topic of perseverance. I personally related to many of the issues raised in Alison's article and felt encouraged by her reflections. I am also thrilled that Jenny was able to interview Barbara Collins for us. Barbara has been an encouragement and inspiration to many women of all ages. Her story certainly testifies to God's power to change and grow us. A big thank you to all our writers.

When the ishah team meet each month, we pray that ishah will be a blessing in your lives, another tool to help you continue running the race. May it especially be so this time.

Enjoy.

Beck Miller

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our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 23:

Owning Up -
Christians
Facing Sin

ISSUE 24:

Money

Here For the Long Haul

BY ALISON FLYNN

Therefore ... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God ... (Hebrews 12:1–2 NIV)

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to exercise perseverance in the face of hardship, persecution and trials—the endurance that keeps on trusting God when life is hard and He seems far from us; the endurance that continues to believe even when the Lord seems to be testing everything we have ever known about Him.

I would argue there is a second type of endurance we are also called to exercise—the endurance of ‘the long haul’. This type of endurance is for the daily grind, for when faith is stretched by the mundane, the sheer routine of the Christian life when it has forgotten to be thankful. It takes us from the zeal and passion of young faith, to determined persistence in the faith throughout the years, to the patient waiting of old age in the faith.

My grandfather epitomised faith in old age when he used to say, at 103 years of age, that the Lord had forgotten to take him home! He longed for the time when he would be with the Lord he had served faithfully all his life; but as he waited for his ‘promotion’ to glory, outliving all his contemporaries, growing tired and frail, his faith was mostly characterised by stoicism. The endurance of waiting tried him very hard.

For me, the challenge of endurance is to go on with passion when so much that was once exciting and stimulating is now habitual and routine. I find myself relating to the example of Sarah, who lived a long life of faith with Abraham, but late in her life is hidden away in a tent when Abraham offers hospitality to three mysterious strangers who come to him with a message from the Lord. Sarah is not only caught eavesdropping on her husband’s consultation with his three lofty

visitors in Genesis 18; the Scriptures also record her laughing at the notion of her bearing a son to Abraham in their old age. To receive such a revelation, and then laugh! I wonder if she has fallen victim to the cynicism and weariness of a long life of waiting for God’s promises to come true, and now, after maintaining faith for so long, she has grown careless about the grace of God.

I am finding this to be the particular temptation of middle age. As a woman in my forties, I rarely battle with temptations on a

believe that if I can escape this stage of life without recourse to dramatic action to express my ‘mid-life crisis’, then that will suffice. But near enough isn’t good enough, and to congratulate ourselves on not falling into sin is not an adequate expression of holiness. Unlike me, the Bible does not draw distinctions between serious violations of the Law and the more shallow, petty transgressions; it does not minimise or trivialise or excuse these actions, and we are not at liberty to persuade ourselves that these matters do not have an impact on our call to holiness.

“the Bible does not draw distinctions between serious violations of the Law and the more shallow, petty transgressions”

grand scale. Rather, my wars are fought—and often lost—on the battlegrounds of blasé cynicism and grumbling. I nag my children, resent my workload, become irritable with my husband or contemptuous towards my neighbour—and barely consider I have anything much to confess at the end of the day. It’s a war of attrition on my call to Christ-likeness; the gradual wearing away of morale and my powers of resistance by persistent attacks. At times my salt is not that savoury, my light is dim, my temperature decidedly lukewarm, and I don’t really have the energy or the inclination to do much about it. On a bad day, I don’t even really care that much! I have grown careless about the grace of God—I find myself taking it for granted, resting easy on the long years of forgiveness I have been privileged to experience, as if I have somehow built up credit in heaven such that I can ‘take time out’ from the daily striving after holiness. But that call to holiness is for our lives at every stage, and it feels like the dreary sins of middle age perhaps pose more threat to the vitality of my faith and faithfulness than the risk of more outrageous falls from grace. Sometimes I am tempted to

The Scriptures make it clear we are to stand firm against anything that draws us away from full obedience to Christ, from committed discipleship, every day of our lives.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to ‘strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees’ (Hebrews 12:12). Often in the midst of a busy workplace, a busy family, and a busy head, I have felt a weariness in my limbs that is an outward expression of the weariness in my soul—but God says we are to run with perseverance. I need to call upon Him more than ever for the refreshment, the grace to keep on pursuing that level of holiness that is the only right response to the outpouring of His love for me in Christ.

This holiness may not be characterised by the energy of my young faith, but I don’t believe I am called to re-enact this enthusiasm. I believe it is my task to discover in this stage of life how the Holy Spirit wants to work through me now; what real holiness looks like in my middle years when it is seasoned by experience, by the settled confidence of having proven God’s faithfulness in so many situations

throughout life. This holiness is steady and purposeful, exercised in the absence of strong emotional responses, lived out in life regardless of circumstances, strong against powerful opposing forces 'like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither' (Psalm 1:3). It is a holiness that stays firm when my emotions tell me to give up or give in; it is choosing the right course of action despite what my feelings or circumstances may be telling me, because I have years of solid experience to remind me that holiness is the right response regardless. It does not need emotional stimulus, but is the lodestar of all my choices whatever other influences seek to sway me.

When I am tempted to downplay my own wrong actions, it is my knowledge of God and of His grace worked out in my life which spurs me to keep on striving to please Him. When I find myself feeling apathetic about my faith, it is this seasoned sense of purpose that keeps me steady and enables me to reject the choices of laziness and disillusionment. As much as I would like to feel more excited about my Christian life at times, the particular joy of this time in my life is that I can go on in my walk with Jesus without those feelings—and when they come, they are yet another gift, elevating my life from the everyday but in no way requisite for it. In the steady, warm comfort of an enduring and committed marriage, the romantic feelings are 'the icing on the cake', but we must not rely on them to keep nurturing the relationship. Likewise, we go on responding to God because nothing changes the miracle of His love for us, His grace in what He has done for us through His Son. Our responses of joy to that are secondary; it is our willing obedience and gratitude regardless of our feelings that best express our love to Him.

I don't always want to pursue a life of holiness. But I choose to, because this is the right response to God's miraculous love, and my life experience has convinced me that the way of obedience is always the way of blessing—whatever my emotions may or may not tell me. I want to be found faithful when the Lord returns, and if I am called to live a long life of faith, then in later life I want to be found still holding fast to my salvation, still proclaiming the Gospel, eagerly awaiting the time when I can cast my crown at His feet and cry 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!' (Revelation 4:8).

■ *Alison is a woman in her forties, challenged and enriched by her life as a 'clergy wife', mum to three almost-adult daughters and one young son, and part-time administrator. She is a member of St Jude's Carlton and one day hopes to dedicate much more of her time to writing.*

FOR FURTHER READING:

Songs of Experience, by Roy Clements
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus
Publications, 1998

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society, 20th Anniversary edition, by Eugene Peterson
Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2000

Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry, by Peter Brain
Kingsford, NSW, Matthias Media, 2004

Restoring Your Spiritual Passion, by Gordon McDonald
Surrey, England, Highland Books, 1993

Where is God When it Hurts? by Phillip Yancey
USA, Zondervan, 1978

Disappointment with God, by Phillip Yancey
USA, Zondervan, 1990

Eggs Benedict

BY CATHY ALTMANN

We have eggs benedict
at a café in Glebe
the yolks full and yellow
on the white plate
vines curling on the fence

She tells me how she knelt
prayed *I commit my life to you*
after seeing her Aunt's white kitchen
(*everything that opens and shuts*)
only empty

What keeps you going?
her eyes are warm
Habit, I admit

The sun reddens the vine leaves
yolks burst yellow

I am the true vine

Later I kneel
on the musty carpet
seeing the white plate
the yellow yolks –

eggs benedict

This poem was first published in Studio magazine.

■ *Cathy Altmann is married to John with children Matt and Sophie. This year she celebrated her 40th birthday. It is 20 years since the day she said the same prayer her friend described over eggs benedict. She will always be grateful for God's gentle, loving presence in her life.
Email: c.altperson@optusnet.com.au*

Tackling Each Day

'I will lead the blind ... I will guide them ... I will not forsake them' (Isaiah 42:16)

BY JENNY KEMP

Barbara Collins has been completely blind for the past five years yet continues to persevere unswervingly in her faith. Jenny Kemp talked with her about her journey.

JENNY *Barbara, what was it that drew you to follow Jesus?*

BARBARA I was born into a dysfunctional family and my parents divorced when I was five. I used to visit my father occasionally and longed to talk to him and for him to hug me. One night he came home at 3 am (he was often out with different women) and I had been waiting to see if I could get a good night hug. When I got down to the lounge room I saw that he was reading the Bible and my little brain couldn't cope. I didn't go any further. Then and there I vowed that if he read the Bible, I never would.

My father sent me to an Anglican girls' boarding school and I became head girl. We had chapel twice a day and I read lessons, but I never really heard the words.

At 18 I met George, my husband, who I saw as my saviour. I moved from a world of unhappiness to a world of happiness but God didn't play a part.

When I was 30, with three small children, I began to think more about God. Being a God fearer but not really knowing Him, I was afraid that if I didn't go back to church, God might 'zap' my children. So I began going to church and I heard the message that God knew all about what I was thinking. I was confronted by the truth that Jesus had died for my sins. In truth, I had not been a nice girl—I was proud, a snob, unkind and I knew all that. With a thankful heart I fell to my knees and surrendered my life to Christ. He began to change me and gave me a great hunger to know more of Him through the Bible.

JENNY *Since 2001, you have been totally blind. Can you share your journey from being fully sighted to where you are now?*

BARBARA When I was 30 I began to stumble over the children's toys, knock over long stemmed wine glasses and have difficulty driving at night. Night blindness is one of the first symptoms of my condition called retinitis pigmentosa (RP), or retinal dystrophy. I just put the symptoms down to being clumsy and being a bad driver!

It was another ten years before I mentioned these to an ophthalmic surgeon at a regular appointment. After some tests he told me that I was going blind, to stop driving, and to start learning Braille. He created havoc in my life and I went into a shock decline.

A friend recommended I see her ophthalmic surgeon, a strong Christian doctor and highly regarded in university circles. He was more experienced in RP and very understanding. He said I could drive during the day and I did so for the next 15 years.

In 2001, at age 70, I lost my sight completely. But I was grateful to God for the 30 years of extra time to prepare and to learn mobilisation and orientation.

JENNY *Have you ever found yourself questioning God?*

BARBARA Yes, I have. I've asked the usual questions: "Why?" and "Why me?" But I've never doubted that it was part of God's purpose for my life. I knew that if he chose to he could heal me. I really battled with that, especially when other people told me I didn't have enough faith and that was why he wasn't healing me. In John 9, in the healing of the blind man, Jesus says that this man will be used to display God's glory. This gave me great hope that God could display his glory through me and my life too.

JENNY *What have been your disappointments?*

BARBARA My biggest disappointment was stopping Bible study leading because this was where God did the biggest miracle in me. I was a girl who said she would never read the Bible, and here I was devouring it. I have been able to continue leading Christianity Explained classes because it is all in my head. That has been a great joy in my life.

JENNY *What blessings have enabled you to keep going?*

BARBARA I can see how the promise of God's grace in 2 Corinthians 12:9 has worked itself in my life. God has blessed me with my husband who keeps the promises he made on our wedding day. Also, I have the blessing of His Word, and the blessing of my Christian family through my church. At no time do I feel blind because I get help at every turn. They are evidence of God's love and care for me.

JENNY *What advice could you give to a Christian woman who is feeling overwhelmed by the circumstances of life and is struggling to persevere?*

BARBARA Look to Jesus and know that he is close. Read the Scriptures. Go to a trusted source who knows their Bible and can counsel you with God's words. Ask God for a friend to pray with you. Keep going to things that are hard, like Bible study and church and make them a priority. Persevering is a matter of tackling each day and finding out how God is going to use you. We will face difficulties, but God is refining our characters in preparation for heaven.

JENNY *To finish, do you have some Bible verses that you've found helpful?*

BARBARA Proverbs 3:5–6, Jeremiah 29:11, Isaiah 42:16.

■ *Jenny Kemp is a full time mum to four kids and is expecting number five very soon. She lives in a terrace opposite the University of Sydney where her husband Rowan is involved in student ministry. Jenny attends St Barnabas' Anglican Church. She reads anything and everything in a desperate attempt to stay sane in the midst of the chaos. Feel free to contact her at rowanjenny@tpg.com.au*

A Study in Perseverance

BY DEB SUGARS

Suitable for personal use, or in small groups.

Definition: Perseverance means to continue steadfastly, especially in something that is either difficult, or tedious, or both.

Alison Flynn's article picks up on these two areas. Barbara Collins talks about perseverance being a matter of tackling each day and finding how God is going to use you.

If you have the Bible on computer, you may like to print a copy of Romans 5:1–11, James 1:1–7 and Psalm 77, so you can write all over them. Alternatively, photocopy the pages of an enlarged version.

A) READ ROMANS 5:1-11

What has been your experience of suffering? What has been your experience in persevering? What expectation do you have of suffering in the lives of Christians?

So far in Romans, Paul has established that God has brought salvation to both Jews and the Gentiles. We have been justified, by Jesus' death (verses 6–11).

1. How are we justified? What is the result of being justified?
2. Unpack what this means (see also Philipians 4:6–7).
3. What is the result of God's grace in our lives in verse 2?
4.
 - i) In what two things do we rejoice in verses 2 and 3?
 - ii) Does this answer surprise you?
 - iii) What does Paul mean by the hope of glory? (See Colossians 1:27—the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory).
5. If we are to both rejoice in our hope of glory and in our sufferings, what does this say about what we can expect as 'normal', in living as a follower of Jesus?
6.
 - i) Draw a diagram of the cause and effect statements in verses 3–5.
 - ii) What is the connection between hope in verse 5 and the rest of our passage?

John Stott points out that Paul gives a summary of the Christian life in these verses in the following way:

"In the word Peace we look back to the enmity that is now over.

In the word Grace we look up to our reconciled Father, in whose favour we now stand.

In the word Glory we look on to our final destiny."

(John Stott, *Men Made New*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1966)

B) READ JAMES 1:1-7

This passage fills out further our understanding of perseverance.

7. According to James, what develops perseverance?
8. What results from perseverance?
9. Am I willing for God to develop perseverance in me, not knowing what this may look like?

C) READ PSALM 77

10. What is the psalmist's problem? (Underline the words indicating this.)
11. Of what does the psalmist accuse God?
12. What change occurs in verse 11? List the actions of the psalmist.
13. How does the psalmist answer the accusations he has made against God?
14. How does this help us in the following:
 - i) When life is unbearably difficult?
 - ii) When life is tedious?
15. What might this look like in your life and relationship with God?
16. How does Psalm 77 help us to pray about and live out perseverance?

TO THINK AND PRAY ABOUT

17. In the light of this study, what attitudes may need to be changed?
18. What areas of persevering in life do I need to pray about as a result of this study?

■ *Deb is an avid reader of ishah, among other things. She is a member of St Jude's Carlton, works with the sun@5 congregation as Discipleship Minister and enjoys time with her husband, John, and her three teenage daughters, even including teaching them to drive!!*

Great is Thy Faithfulness

BY VALERIE TING

Book Review:

Hidden Sorrow, Lasting Joy

by Anneke Companjen

Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2000

Imagine meeting the guy of your dreams—he loves God and lives for Him passionately; in fact he's a pastor. What's more, he loves you, and thinks you're tops. So much so, in fact, that he proposes! You accept, and look forward with excitement to the wedding date. Only six months away ... just five months to go. Then you hear that he's been shot, murdered by anti-Christian militants. Instead of celebrating a wedding you're speaking at his funeral.

Or imagine you are married to the guy of your dreams. One day, policemen show up at your front door, take him away, put him in jail on trumped up charges. How long for, no one knows. You get to see him for 15 minutes once a month—on the few occasions when a sympathetic guard is on duty.

Can you imagine being in either situation? I can't, but these are true stories of our sisters in Christ, women in the persecuted church. Anneke Companjen is the wife of the president of Open Doors International, an organisation that supports and mobilizes support for the suffering church, and she has written a book about the experiences of twenty women, wives of men who are threatened, imprisoned, even killed for their faith. *Hidden Sorrow, Lasting Joy* was written to raise up more women who will give to, pray for, and minister, to these suffering women.

The structure of this book makes it ideal reading for busy women. Each chapter is a stand-alone story which can be read in one short sitting. While the narrative is not always as tightly coherent as the literature buff in me would like, the book is easy to read, its stories powerful and honest.

This book humbled and inspired me, as I read stories of women who remained faithful to God under incredible pressure, paying immense costs for their faith. What suffering does following Christ involve for us? Maybe copping a bit of flak from some colleagues and peers for intolerant views? A less luxurious lifestyle than would be possible because of money given to God's kingdom? The pain of sorrowing with God over our lost and blind world? The suffering these women endure puts our suffering into perspective. Sisters in Christ around the world are

giving up much more for the Gospel than I am: not just comfort, but safety, jobs, health, houses, family, freedom, husbands... This book stirred me to pray for these women, that they will know the God of all comfort, trust His goodness and love, and experience His power and strength so they can keep persevering in Christ.

I was struck and encouraged even more by how much these women's lives are testaments to God's incredible faithfulness. In their grief, pain, and isolation, they are forced to rely on God—and He comes through. Again and again, when they have nothing left but Jesus, Jesus proves sufficient. How many of us can say the same? Yet we are loved by, and know and serve, the same God—He will prove sufficient for us, too, come what may. This book reminds us that we should not rely less on God than these women. Our need is just as great, though expressed in different ways. Where they pray for persecution to stop, I was stirred to think that maybe I should pray for a bit of persecution to shake me out of my apathy and my self-centred, middle-class Christianity. Or maybe just to let their examples, of living for Christ when it hurts, encourage me to embrace the freedom we're blessed with in Australia and speak boldly of Jesus.

Do read *Hidden Sorrow, Lasting Joy*. You may find, as I did, that you are stirred to prayer for our suffering sisters—and anything that makes me pray passionately for someone other than myself is a great thing! By the end of it, I think you will be singing along with these women "Great is Your faithfulness" (Psalm 68:19) to our Creator who has suffered too and daily bears our burdens.

■ Valerie finishes training to be a secondary school English and History teacher this year. She is looking forward to how God will work through her to His glory when she begins teaching full-time next year. She enjoys Brie, bridge, and banter, as well as some other words beginning with 'b' (and some that don't).



write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed to ishahmag@hotmail.com or posted to *ishah*, c/-56 Collier Cres, Brunswick West, Vic, 3056.

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU...

The *ishah* team is looking for your input! We are encouraged when we hear your responses to *ishah* and would love to publish some of your responses here.

You could also write and let us know what you would like to read. Maybe you wish for longer articles, more poetry, more interviews or more Bible studies. Would you like to see a new, regular column added to the magazine? We really would love to hear your ideas and stories.

You can email us at ishahmag@hotmail.com, or write to *ishah* c/o 56 Collier Cres, Brunswick 3055.

We look forward to hearing from you soon!

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

STARTING POINT

HOW NOT TO BECOME VIDUOTS

It happened the other day ... I walked into the lounge-room and trod on a wet patch on the floor. I traced it to the saliva dripping from my son's open mouth. He was watching television.

When my children are watching TV you can wave your hand in front of their faces and they hardly blink. Now, I don't think my children are unique. In fact I've watched their friends do the same thing. It's easy to become an unquestioning consumer of TV. That's the problem with TV.

We think that watching TV is a passive activity, but it actually requires immense concentration and skill! You have to decode all the messages that are bombarding your brain. You have to understand the cultural clichés that it is using to communicate. We become so clever at it, that most of this activity occurs at the sub-conscious level. We absorb and translate thousands of images and sounds, without consciously engaging with it. Then it begins to re-emerge in conversation and behaviour.

For my children it may manifest itself as little remarks that sting me, or the modelling of behaviour that seemed cool on TV but which is unacceptable in my house. It was okay when they were watching *Play School*! Now it's *The Simpsons* and *Blue Water High*. These TV shows have a lot to offer, but they often operate at a level which goes over my children's heads. *The Simpsons* bases most of its humour on irony, which my kids are not about to comprehend. *Blue Water High* often challenges the concept of 'cool', but the temptation is to mindlessly reproduce the 'cool'.

I don't want to ban TV in my house, but I do want my children to watch it discerningly. I am trying to teach them to relate to each other while watching, to question what they are watching, to be able to recognise truth, and to beware of when they are being manipulated.

■ Kara Martin is mother of Jaslyn (11 years) and Guy (9 years); director of a boutique Bible college; lecturer on the spirituality of friendship and a history of Christian spirituality; her past lives include TV journalism and management consultant. You can contact her at kara.martin.socs@rmc.nsw.edu.au