

# Seeing Christianity as a Long Obedience in the Same Direction

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## **Galatians 6:9 (The Message)**

*So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. (For context, read 6:7-10.)*

In his "long obedience" book, Peterson writes, "One aspect of the *world* that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. ... There is a great market for religious experience in the world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."

We might find, even within ourselves, a similar lack of enthusiasm for long-haul good deeds, work that serves Christ by serving others, but which comes with little thanks and few rewards, and no completion date in sight.

The same might be said for remaining honest and acting with integrity when others are getting ahead by disregarding those values.

**Questions:** To what personal experience might you apply the encouragement expressed in this verse? Why? What is your response to Peterson's quote above? What is the story of your "long obedience in the same direction?"

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*In the News*

## **Eugene Peterson, Writer of *The Message* Bible Paraphrase, Dies at age 85**

Eugene Peterson has completed his "long obedience in the same direction." The Presbyterian pastor, best known for authoring *The Message* Bible, died today at age 85, a week after entering hospice care for complications related to heart failure and dementia.

Outside of Christian circles, Peterson is not well known, but still more so than the average preacher-teacher within the church. And many who do not know his name still know his powerful rendering of the Bible into contemporary language, titled *The Message*, which is a bestseller, or some of his other books,

the most recent of which was released earlier this year. Still others may recall the YouTube documentary about praying the Psalms that Peterson did in 2016 with U2 frontman Bono.

Author Winn Collier first shared the news on Twitter. “My dear friend and pastor Eugene Peterson has died this morning,” he wrote. “The lantern is out, but the joy he carried with him to his final breaths endures. Eugene is now with the Triune God he has loved his entire life. Memory eternal.”

Peterson was a founding pastor in 1962 of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for 29 years before retiring in 1991. He then worked as Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, until retiring in 2006. He continued to write books after that.

Peterson’s Bible paraphrase and writings on spirituality inspired evangelical leaders and laity alike. Christianity Today had described him as a “‘shepherd’s shepherd’—a pastoral writer who aims to keep Christian leaders grounded in robust biblical theology amid the din of shallow preaching aimed at self-improvement and megachurch marketing campaigns to ‘do more.’”

“If there’s a single word that identifies the contemplative life, it is congruence—congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it,” Peterson once said. “Two areas are conspicuously in need of attention these days regarding ways and means, areas in which we’re doing the right thing the wrong way.”

He noted that Christian spirituality is often geared toward being a better person and congregational life is turned into a consumer enterprise.

“Formation of spirit, cultivation of soul, developing a contemplative life, realizing congruence between the way and truth—all this is slow, slow work requiring endless patience,” he said. “Until we care as much about and are as careful with the means as we are the ends, virtually anything we do makes matters worse. Spiritual theology is primarily about means. Life is contemplative when the means become congruent with the ends.”

Peterson was never a Billy Graham, had not filled arenas or spoken to mass meetings. His was a more pastoral ministry, rooted in spending the majority of

his professional life at a single congregation in Maryland, all the while writing and sharing his insights in book after book.

Robert Creech, a professor of Christian ministries at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, stated, "Eugene Peterson has encouraged, formed, and often literally saved the ministry of more than one pastor over the years through his writing and thinking (I would include myself in that list). He has refreshed scripture for many through his thoughtful paraphrase of the Bible published as *The Message*."

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Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Habakkuk 2:4 (The Message)**

*... the person in right standing before God through loyal and steady believing is fully alive, really alive.*

Some biblical commentators point out that "faith" doesn't do justice to the original Hebrew word *'emûnâ*, at least not in the sense of how we use the word "faith" today. By "faith," we often mean either belief in a doctrine or an inner posture toward God. Both of those meanings are important and have a place in what it means to be a Christian, but this verse is not referring to either of those definitions.

The Hebrew word *'emûnâ* is more properly translated as "faithfulness," which makes possible a translation such as "the righteous person will live by steadfast endurance." Peterson's translation is especially good, for it touts the benefit of the long obedience in the same direction: being "fully alive, really alive."

**Question:** In what ways do you see steady faithfulness and righteousness as connected? How have you been able to endure in discipleship? What sort of reward or affirmation have you experienced, if any?

### **Luke 9:62 (The Message)**

*Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day." (For context, read 9:57-62.)*

From the context verses, it's clear that Jesus was addressing these words in verse 62 not to people who have been his followers for a long time, but rather to some who were at that point offering to become his followers. Thus, his words are an attempt to give a picture from the very beginning of what discipleship demands -- in short, "You'll be expected not to turn back."

**Question:** What was your first reaction when Jesus called you to follow him?

### **Hebrews 10:35-36 (The Message)**

*So don't throw it all away now. You were sure of yourselves then. It's still a sure thing! But you need to stick it out, staying with God's plan so you'll be there for the promised completion. (For context, read 10:32-39.)*

The author of Hebrews here urges Christians to have endurance and to persevere in doing God's will so that they will "receive what was promised" by God.

**Questions:** What benefits come with long obedience in the same direction even if there is no reward at the end? In what specific ways do you practice a long obedience in the *Lord's* direction?

### **Prayer, from Psalm 119:33-34 (The Message)**

God, teach me lessons for living so I can stay the course. Give me insight so I can do what you tell me -- my whole life one long, obedient response. *Amen.*