

Title: Perseverance
Date: March 6, 2022
Subject: We are to persevere in our walk to heaven with Christ.
Scripture: Hebrews 10:35 – 39; 11:1 - 27; 12:1 -3

Last week in Sunday School, video teacher Louie Giglio spoke of the difficulties faced by the church in the opening chapters of Acts. He concluded that some Christians may have felt like or decided to “get off the train.” This prompted Jan to say she’s not getting off the train. Others nodded in agreement as we discussed what it meant to follow Jesus.

This morning our focus is on perseverance and its siblings – endurance, persistence and patience. They’re tied to all the other parts of our series on the MORE the Lord has for us, especially faithfulness.

John Wooden coached the powerhouse UCLA basketball team to 10 national championships in 12 years. More important than the awards and accolades was being a follower of Jesus Christ. He said, “I have always tried to make it clear that basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior.” And more to our topic: “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” There’s always MORE for us grow to know God better, to grow closer to him, to experience, to obey, to serve, to be stretched.

I worked from home a week ago Tuesday because of the ice storm. I grabbed one of Jean’s Bibles so I could have a handheld text to look at. I almost used what I found last week from Philippians 2:12 on “continue to work out your salvation” but it fit better with perseverance. Jean has notes beside vv. 12 through 18 on the theme “Keep on”: “Keep obeying. Keep working. Keep searching. Keep on cheerfully. Keep witnessing. Keep seeing that discipleship is not for fair weather Christians.”

Author Eugene Peterson suggests “it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest” in the message of the Gospel as following Christ faithfully requires “a long obedience in the same direction.” That’s what we’re talking about: a long obedience in the same direction.

1. What is perseverance

READ Hebrews 10:35 - 39

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines perseverance: “continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition.” Vocabulary.com “*Perseverance* is not giving up. It is *persistence* and tenacity, the effort required to do something and keep doing it till the end, even if it's hard.” All the definitions I found connected the completion of the task with the presence of obstacles that make it more difficult.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I think perseverance can be view similarly. Perseverance is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Persevere in loving and serving and following the Lord and expect....Perseverance is staying with something until the end -- the dishes, a school report, a house renovation or the Christian life.

If we back up a few verses to v. 32, we'll see the word translated *contest* or *conflict* or *struggle*. It comes from the Greek word for "athletic." God often has the writers of the New Testament describe the Christian life using athletic terms like a wrestling match or running a race and even boxing.

James J. Corbett was a boxer nicknamed Gentleman James. He attained status as world heavyweight champ. Because of his scientific style and rigorous training, he's acclaimed as the "Father of Modern Boxing." Several of his fights lasted more than 20 rounds with one going 61. He knew something about what it took to box. "When your feet are so tired that you have to shuffle back to the center of the ring, fight one more round! When your arms are so tired that you can hardly lift your arms to come on guard, fight one more round! When your nose is bleeding and your eyes are black and you're so tired you wish your opponent would crack you one on the jaw and put you to sleep – don't quit – fight one more round!"

If want a more refined opinion, former President Calvin Coolidge: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not – nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not – unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not – the world is full of educated failures. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent." We might choose a different word than omnipotent.

It was put more succinctly by Dolly Parton: "I have never tried quitting and I have never quit trying."

2. The goal

The goal of persevering for followers of Jesus Christ is getting to heaven. That's when we'll be rewarded and receive what has been promised. It's the end of the race.

There's a goal for this life - become spiritually mature. It's explained: "the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4); "We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame" (Romans 5:2–4). Perseverance is again connected to sufferings and trials.

3. The need to persevere

God our loving Heavenly Father through the Bible implores us to not give up, to not quit but to continue on. Greg Brown "Perseverance in working out our salvation is important because of temptations toward complacent, apathetic Christianity."

There are those who offer excuses, saying Christianity is just so hard. They may think God will cut them lots of slack because he's an understanding and forgiving God. The prophet Malachi addressed this attitude. He spoke to people who offered crippled and diseased animals to the Lord. He told them to try offering those half-hearted, even unacceptable sacrifices to their governor.

A young woman was married with two small children. Unfortunately, she was also a drug addict. She sought help from a local pastor as she professed to believe in Christ and said she wanted to follow Him. The pastor discovered she had no idea of what that meant. Once when she was relatively sober, he described a daily walk with Christ, a daily time in the Word and prayer, what obedience to the Bible means, how to think like a

Christian, etc. When done, he asked, “Have you ever done anything close to what I’ve just described?” She said, “Yeah, I did that once for two weeks, but it didn’t work.” She thought she’d given it a fair try. The pastor explained the Christian faith isn’t a two-week sprint. It’s a lifelong marathon. (adapted from Steven J. Cole).

Contrast her with Cynthia Heald’s story “I did not grow up in a Christian home. We went to church rather sporadically, but it was more social than biblical. My father was fun loving but also a borderline alcoholic. There were frequent hearty disagreements between my mom and dad, followed by days of silence, then somehow things went back to normal until the next episode. Many nights I cried myself to sleep.

“When I was twelve years old, I was given an opportunity to ask Christ into my life and I responded without any reservation. Although I had very little spiritual teaching, I did have a heart for God. I think it was then that I began to learn to persevere. The Lord became my refuge, my safe place. When I was in pain, I cried out and He was there for me.

“As I moved through the next thirty-seven years, it was the Lord who gave me the love and patience I needed to interact with my dad. Each time we were together, I sensed God encouraging me, “You can do this. My grace is all you need. I am the strength of your heart.”

“Hebrews 11 clearly details the lives of men and women who exercised great faith while facing compelling challenges. We read that some of them were tortured, some chained in prison, some escaped death by the edge of the sword. Yet verse 34 notes, “Their weakness was turned to strength.” Their example of faith and endurance serves to encourage us to trust God to perfect His power in our weaknesses. Hebrews 12:1-2 exhorts us, then, to run our race with the same endurance these faithful pioneers experienced.

“My dad did come to know the Lord shortly before he died, but he was never spiritually sensitive enough to help or encourage me in my race. Yet for the many years I have had to confront heartache and hard times, my heavenly Father has wrapped His arms around me and said, “I am here; we’ll get through this together, for My strength is made perfect in your weakness” (Cynthia Heald, *Becoming a Woman of Strength*, navpress.com/sites/thedisciplemaker/2017/07/perseverance-through-trials).

4. Where to find encouragement

From Jesus Christ. Skip ahead to Hebrews 12. READ Hebrews 12:1 – 3.

The New Living Translation calls Jesus “the champion.” He’s gone before and leads the way to victory. He persevered through his temptations, those at the beginning of his ministry when the devil tempted him in the wilderness and all through his life. The ultimate in perseverance was through the agony and suffering at the cross which he spoke of as the place where He would be glorified (John 13:31, 32). He’s both the example of perseverance and our goal. He’s the finish line. When we cross the finish line we’ll be with him.

We’re to fix our eyes on Jesus. In another place in Hebrews: “But we do see Jesus...crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone...it was fitting that God...should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered” (Hebrews 2:9, 10). We look to Jesus for help and strength, to see how he faced life and desire to copy his example.

We get encouragement from people. Hebrews 11 is known as the “Hall of Faith.” It could be the “Hall of Perseverance.” The people kept going in their pursuit of God and what he had in store for them. Though they didn’t physically see God, they saw him spiritually. They looked forward “to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v. 11); “longing for a better country—a heavenly one” (vv. 13-16).

Hebrews 11 speaks of God 13 times before it mentions Christ in vv. 26 and 27 in reference to the faith/perseverance of Moses: “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.”

Moses lived at least 1300 years before Christ yet saw him who is invisible. Moses’ perseverance was a 40-year stint as a shepherd in the desert after he left Egypt after killing an Egyptian. He was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. He was aware of the Messianic promises. Christ made appearances, Christophanies, in the Old Testament. Moses had his encounter at the burning bush (Exodus 3:2; Acts 7:30).

Moses and the other Old Testament faithful “perseverers” form a company of witnesses.

There are others in the Bible. Paul’s goal was to finish the race (Acts 20:24). He fought hard to do so (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). He maintained his focus on pressing toward what was ahead rather than his past accomplishments, pre-Christian life, failures and other stuff he left behind (Philippians 3:13, 14). “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

The back of the sermon notes highlights the perseverance of Job. He’s a tremendous study, how he responded to unparalleled difficulty. The only place Job is mentioned in the New Testament briefly calls us to look at his perseverance and also brings to mind that of the prophets (James 5:10, 11).

We can look at Christians of the past. There are the stories we can read, hear or watch about followers of Christ. You can use our RightNow Media platform – There’s the series Torchlighters which recreates the stories of people like Eric Liddell of Chariots of Fire, Jim Elliot martyred in Ecuador, Corrie Ten Boom, Harriet Tubman, Amy Carmichael. There’s Drive Thru History whether ancient history or American history.

There are also the living examples of people we know who we’ve seen and helped persevere.

5. What insights help?

There are things that make it harder to persevere. These things are to be thrown off. The first is everything that hinders. Many translations speak of these as “weights” while others regard them as “encumbrances” which are impediments which are hindrances. These are things which hamper us. It could be attitudes, relationships, possessions, chasing after teaching, anything that causes us to lose our focus.

The second thing to throw off is sins that so easily entangle, trip up, cling so closely, ensnare. Sin holds us back from fully following Jesus. Don’t let sin hold us back.

One of the differences between Olympic downhill skiers and snowboarders on the half pipe is the way they dress. Skiers wear streamlined outfits to minimize air resistance as they zoom down the hill. Snowboarders – baggy pants, baggy jackets, baggy everything.

The analogy in Hebrews 12 is more of a skier. They bundle up in a heavy coat to stay warm until it's time for their run. Off with the coat. They don't bring along equipment they've used for strength training and conditioning. No ankle weights. No dumbbells. No backpacks with an energy drink and Twinkies in case they get thirsty and hungry for that yellow cake and cream goodness. No umbrella to keep the harsh winter sun off their head. They get rid of all that stuff and much more.

I had college buddies, "Know how you can lose ten pounds of ugly fat? Cut off your head." Needless to say, I haven't stayed real close to them. The idea is good – get rid of the stuff we don't need.

We need to be diligent. "Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come... Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:8, 15, 16). Godliness, seeking to exhibit the character and attitude of the Father, walking with Christ requires diligence in being examples to other believers, utilizing the spiritual gifts the Lord has given us, focusing on the Bible to live out its truths and keep picking the weeds that spring up in our lives.

We shouldn't try to do a lifetime of perseverance all at once. Someone has said, "By the mile it's a trial, by the yard it's hard but by the inch it's a cinch!" Though the statement is a little too corny, the sentiment expresses the need to move one step at a time or inch by inch.

John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania had won marathons in Africa and easily qualified for the Olympics in Mexico City. The altitude caused his legs to cramp severely but he kept running. About halfway through the race he tangled with other runners and fell, dislocating his knee, scraping his leg, and hurting his shoulder. But he didn't stop. He labored on and finished the race. Seventy-five people started the race. He was the last, the fifty-seven to finish it, more than an hour behind the winner. The crowd had dwindled to a couple thousand people who saw him complete the race. They began cheering as he circled the now darkened track. Later, a reporter asked, "Why didn't you quit when you were hurt, bruised, bloody, discouraged? Why didn't you quit?" His answer: "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."

God calls us to finish the race.

In the Olympics and any sporting contest, there's only one winner. Not so with the Christian life. We can all be winners and our aim is not merely a participation trophy. It's the crown of righteousness that marks us as being righteous, in a right standing with God (2 Timothy 4:8).

Benediction:

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1). “May the Lord make our love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else... May he strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (1 Thessalonians 3:12, 13)

“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

May we not let sin reign in our mortal bodies so that we obey its evil desires. May we not offer any part of ourselves to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of ourselves to him as an instrument of righteousness, for when we offer ourselves to someone as obedient slaves, we are slaves of the one we obey—whether we are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness (Romans 6:12, 13, 16)