

Perseverance

Psalm 129

John Denver sings a song titled- "Prayers, poems and promises." There's a line in the song that goes like: "For though my life's been good to me...there's still so much to do. So many things my mind has never known."

There's this temptation we have in life to jump into all sorts of things. It's like we don't want to miss anything. We have hobbies, and buy all sorts of things that we think we'll like to have or experience. I can remember Jessika growing up and getting involved in collecting business cards. We loved to help her do this, but then one day it just stopped. Helen and I and friends were still getting the cards for Jessika, but they just piled up until one day I asked her what she was going to do with them...she said she wasn't interested anymore. Then her new hobby was collecting anything to do with cows...so we did the same thing and got caught up in her cow collection...but this also...out of nowhere...stopped.

As parents we like to see our children involved in different things, but we also like to see them follow through as well. For a child this can be difficult sometimes. Truth is for adults this can be difficult as well. Jessika was involved in Tae Kwon Do...but like some of her hobbies--one day she just wanted to quit. It was hard keeping her involved in something she didn't want to do. Our motivation was to teach her how to follow through on things. Some people might call this "stick-to-itiveness." I like that word. The church has a word for this-- **perseverance**.

Perseverance is a good word. Perseverance is one of those words that embody Christian discipleship. Over the years I have come to admire those Christians whose life reflects perseverance.

I also admire Psalm 129.

1 "They have greatly oppressed me from my youth," let Israel say;

2 "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.

Israel is tough! People of God are tough. World history has shown again and again how people of faith are attacked--but they have not won! Throughout world history the world has tried everything to snuff out the people of God, but it has failed. The world has tried persecution, torture and exile, but people of faith have endured. In fact it looks like persecution has only strengthened people of faith.

2 "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.

Do you think that Christian faith is a fragile kind of faith and lifestyle that can only flourish when the weather conditions are just right--or do you see Christian faith like a tough perennial that somehow, even in times of drought and storm, life still comes up out of the ground year after year?

Listen to another writer's perspective on this-- **Isaiah 53:1-11**

1 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. **3** He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Look at this...the picture Isaiah paints is pretty dismal. This is a picture of rejection and persecution. What good could ever come to the one who had this bad of a life? Not much, it would seem.

But Isaiah shows us the results of such a life.

10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. **11** After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

This is tough faith! The person of faith outlasts all the oppressors in life. Faith lasts! At least this is what we see in Jesus. The very beginning of his ministry starts with baptism, but moves immediately into the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness--and his ministry ends in that horrible reality on Calvary.

I mean has anyone in history ever experienced or had to endure this kind of relentless, and merciless beating down from beginning to end? Satan first tries to knock Jesus off track by showing him a better way, or at the very least an easier way. And we know that story--Jesus holds off. Jesus doesn't give in to the temptations Satan has heaped on him. But the story doesn't end here. The story brings us to the other end of Jesus' life. It's the end where he is on the cross--where his body has been beaten and tortured. We know that story! And the result of the story is this incomprehensible kindness... "Father, forgive them"--and then this peaceful but deliberate "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"--to--resurrection.

Paul's story: **1 Corinthians 11:23-29** He says, I have been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. **24** Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, **26** I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. **27** I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. **28** Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. **29** Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

None of these things pushed Paul off the path. None of these things told Paul that he made a mistake while on that Damascus road to leave Judaism and to give his life for Christ's sake. We know the story. Nothing pushed Paul away from God. At the end of his life some of his last words were--**Philippians 3:10-14 [TNIV]** I want to know Christ--yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. **12** Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Now this is follow through! This is the meaning of “stick-to-itiveness.” This is what perseverance is. It is patience. Patience with God. Faith, lasts! Faith is a way that works! Faith has been tested, and it is tough!

The Psalmist moves to an illustration of tough faith. **v. 3 Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.**

Here’s Israel, laid out flat and vulnerable. Their enemies beat them like farmers use oxen to plow their fields. They cut long furrows in the back of Israel. Imagine the beating. The blood, the pain and the torture they endured.

But suddenly, we read-- v. 4 **But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.**" All of a sudden the pain stops. The commands for the oxen to cut the furrows are heard, but the plows don’t work. God has cut Israel free from the cords of the wicked. The harness cords, the cords that connected the plow to the oxen, have been cut.

Same scene, last illustration: **vv. 5-8 May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame. 6 May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; 7 reapers cannot fill their hands with it, nor those who gather fill their arms. 8 May those who pass by not say to them, "The blessing of the LORD be on you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."**

It looks like the Psalmist is saying that opposition to the people of faith is **like grass on the roof**. Grass on the roof is thin and in most cases burned out by the midday sun. No one harvests from the roof. No one can harvest burned grass. No one would ever be walking down the road and notice this grass on the roof and yell out, “Hey, great harvest you have there. May the blessing of the Lord be upon you.”

Eugene Peterson says “**this illustration is like a cartoon designed to bring a smile to the people of faith.**”

Don’t miss the punch of this Psalm. Many times it can look like the world around us is getting the best of us. It’s like that grass that germinates on the roof. It starts out looking real good, but the midday sun hasn’t burned yet. The world’s effort to undermine God is futile. **IT CAN’T BE DONE!**

Our message today is found in the center of this Psalm. **v. 4 the LORD is righteous.** When the bible says that God is righteous, the emphasis is that God will stick with us, He is always dependable in this relationship, and always there for us.

This idea of God being righteous is not about God being right... although we know this to be true. Here, God being righteous is about the relationship he has with us, his people. It is about a relationship between the Creator and the created. ¹

¹<http://www.studylight.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T7429>

As we read the earlier parts of the Old Testament we are struck by the fact that much of the early Hebrew morality was of this group kind. The righteous man was the man who performed the rites which had been handed down from the beginning ([Deuteronomy 6:25](#)). The meaning of some of these rites is lost in obscurity, but from a very early period the characteristic of Hebrew righteousness is that it moves in the direction of what we should call today the enlargement of humanity. There seemed to be at work, not merely the forces which make for the preservation of the group, not merely the desire to please the God of the Hebrews for the sake of the material favors which He might render the Hebrews, but

This is why the Christian can look back over their life and though they identify that there are times of cruelty, tragedies, setbacks, times of suffering, disappointments and depressions--Christians can see all of this and see it as a road of blessing. They can even make a song out of it. **1 "They have greatly oppressed me from my youth," let Israel say; 2 "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.** It's because God is righteous. God is a God of his word. God sticks with us. This is what perseverance is all about. Perseverance is not about our determination to hold on. Perseverance has everything to do with God's faithfulness. We do not survive in faith by our ability to hold on. We survive in faith because God is righteous--because God is a God of his word. God sticks with us!

Christian discipleship is more about God's righteousness, and less and less our own. Perseverance comes when we map out the faithfulness of God, and not convincing ourselves that we can be righteous by our own ability--at best this is short lived. This will get old as quick as collecting business cards or cows!

This is precisely what the Hebrew writer is talking about. In Chapter 11, we see a list of a group of people who lived by faith. The writer is really listing a group of people who centered their lives on the righteous God who followed through on his promises. This is why they were faithful and persevered. None of these people lived sinless lives yet they are our examples of faithful living. What we see is that God stuck with them, even at times when they were rebellious and disobedient. What we see is how these faithful people learned to stick with God.

And then we read these words from **Hebrews 12:1-2:**

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, 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, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. So that you may persevere!

Life comes, and many times it comes at full force. This was true in the 1st. century and it's true today. Like them, we believe in a God we can not see, serve a God who doesn't always give us what we want, trust a God who lets babies die and good people suffer. It's easy sometimes to get discouraged and to start complaining. But the Hebrew writer gives his readers something to remember: **Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

What we hear from this is to quit complaining. Take a look at the road you've been on and see where you have come from, and where you are going. Take up the song and sing "**They have greatly**

the factors which make for the betterment of humanity as such. As we examine the laws of the Hebrews, even at so late a time as the completion of the formal Codes, we are indeed struck by traces of primitive survivals ([Numbers 5:11-31](#)). There are some injunctions whose purpose we cannot well understand. But, on the other hand, the vast mass of the legislation had to do with really human considerations. There are rules concerning Sanitation ([Leviticus 13](#)), both as it touches the life of the group and of the individual; laws whose mastery begets emphasis, not merely upon external consequences, but upon the inner result in the life of the individual ([Psalms 51:3](#)); and prohibitions which would indicate that morality, at least in its plainer decencies, had come to be valued on its own account. If we were to seek for some clue to the development of the moral life of the Hebrews we might well find it in this emphasis upon the growing demands of human life as such. A suggestive writer has pointed out that the apparently meaningless commandment, "Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk" ([Exodus 23:19](#)), has back of it a real human purpose, that there are some things which in themselves are revolting apart from any external consequences (see also [Leviticus 18](#)).

oppressed me from my youth," let Israel say; "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.

In that Denver song he also writes these words: I've been lately thinking about my life's time. All the things I've done and how it's been. And I can't help believing in my own mind, I know I'm gonna hate to see it end.

Your ability to persevere, to hang in there, to have stick-to-itiveness does not come down to experiencing it all. We will never be able to experience it all. Life comes, and many times it comes hard and fast. When we discover that God is a God who sticks with us--that God is a God who is righteous--that God is for us, then it is possible for us to persevere!

May the blessing of the Lord be on you.

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