

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of ups and downs. The stock market is up; then it's down. Gas prices go up and down. The temperature in Texas goes up and then it goes higher!

There's an old joke about a man who jumped out of an airplane only to discover his parachute was jammed. As he fell toward the ground he was trying to find another cord to pull. And suddenly he looked down and a man shot past him, flying upward at a tremendous speed. The man with the parachute yelled, "Hey, do you know anything about parachutes?" The other guy yelled down, "No. Do you know anything about gas stoves?"

The Christian life is full of ups and downs. Every character in the Bible from Adam to Zacchaeus had good days and bad days. Last week's passage was a "Debbie downer" passage with harsh words toward those who were guilty of spiritual desertion. They had left their post in church and gone AWOL (Absent without Love).

But this passage is a fixer upper. We're going to read words of encouragement and hope for believers who struggle with the ups and downs of life. Let's resume reading the letter at Hebrews 10:32-39.

"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

Many years ago when I was a student in seminary, we were taught that every sermon should be able to be condensed into one main idea. It was called a sermon in a sentence. So let me give you the one sentence that summarizes this message. Actually, it is a sentence right out of the passage of scripture we just read: "You need to PERSEVERE so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has PROMISED." (Hebrews 10:36) That's why I have entitled the message "Persevere for the Promise."

How many promises do think God has made? There's a little devotional book called *A Promise a Day* that contains 365 promises of God—one for each day of a year. But God has made many more promises than one a day. Herbert Lockyer wrote a book entitled, *All the Promises in the Bible*, in which he there are 7,457 promises of God found in the Bible!

The great English Baptist Pastor, Charles Spurgeon, said this about God's promises: "God cannot go back on His Word. His promises are like checks He has written to us. All we need to do is endorse them with faith and then present them to heaven's bank for payment."

That's why we must persevere for the promise. Let me give you four pictures of perseverance. You could call these the "Four Ups of Perseverance."

1. GET UP! WHEN LIFE KNOCKS YOU DOWN.

"Remember those earlier days...when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering." (Hebrews 10:32) It's hard for us to understand the level of opposition and persecution these early believers endured. The Roman government persecuted them because they were Christians. But they faced a double shot of persecution. The Jews at the synagogue persecuted them because they were Christians. From this text we see some were imprisoned, and some of them had their possessions taken away. When they saw their possessions confiscated, they realized that they had better and lasting possessions in heaven.

How would you feel if you went home from church today and there was a U.S. Army truck in your driveway and they were loading up all of your furniture and possessions? You ask, "Why are you doing this?" They say, "Because you're one of those crazy Christians."

Our challenge may not be persecution, but there are plenty of things in life that want to knock us down. Bad circumstances, mean people, pain, and sorrow all gather around you looking for the chance for a knockout blow. The key is that even though you may be knocked down; don't be knocked out. Get back up. This verse says these Christians stood their ground in the great contest of suffering. Did you know that suffering is a contest? It's like a competition. And God is looking to see if you'll get back up when life knocks you down. I read one poster that said, "When life knocks you down, roll over and look up and the stars for a minute, and then get back up."

One of my football heroes is Emmitt Smith. At 5'9", he was always undersized, but he had a real tenacity about him. He holds two important NFL records. You know about the first, but you may not know about the second. First, he is the all-time leading rusher with 18,355 yards. But second he leads in the number of times he was tackled: 4,306. And after every one of those 4,306 tackles, he got back up to his feet, and said, "Is that all you got?"

That should be our attitude as followers of Jesus. We're going to be knocked down many times, but we need to have a positive attitude and stand back up. We should be like that little inflatable clown with weights in the bottom. You knock him down and he just rises back to vertical.

James was Jesus' half-brother. They had the same mother, Mary, but different dads. Jesus was the Son of God and James was the son of Joseph. James was the pastor of the first church in Jerusalem. The believers were facing persecution and trials. James wrote, "Consider it a great

joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." (James 1:2-3 CSB)

The contest is to reveal the depth of your faith. Perseverance comes as a result of tenacious faith that refuses to stay down when you're knocked down. The writer says, "Remember how you won the contest in the past and it will help you with your present and future challenges." Can you look back in your life and think about a time when you got knocked down? You might have been knocked down by a health problem, a financial problem, or a relational problem. But you got back up and here you are today. Remember that, and keep standing up.

When we used to sing the hymn, "Come Thou Fount" the second verse said, "Here I raise my Ebenezer." 99% of people who sang that wondered, "What's an Ebenezer?" Ebenezer Scrooge? Nope. Here's the rest of the story. In 1 Samuel 7, a large Philistine army attacked the Israelites. God's army was outnumbered. But Samuel prayed and God scared the Philistines with loud thunder and gave the Israelites the victory. So Samuel raised a stone as a remembrance. He called it Ebenezer, which means "Stone of Help." Every time in the future people passed that rock, they remembered how God had delivered them.

How many of you have Ebenezers in your past? These are times when God delivered you. Can you think of a time like that? Let's raise our Ebenezer right now. Repeat after me, "God you delivered me before. And I believe you'll do it again!" The first UP of Perseverance is stand up when life knocks you down.

2. CHEER UP! LIFE WILL GET BETTER.

The Bible says, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded." (Hebrews 10:35) I once heard someone complain, "Someone told me, 'cheer up, things could be worse.' And I cheered up and sure enough, things got worse!" I didn't say Cheer up this *world* would get better. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you can cheer up because life *will* get better. I really do believe that every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.

When I was in college, I first memorized John 16:33 in the Living Bible paraphrase. Jesus said, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows, but cheer up, for I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33 TLB)

Late in his life, Martin Luther often battled periods of dark depression. He had been kicked out of the Catholic Church. Some of his friends were forsaking him. He bore the weight of leading a congregation and a seminary. He was also married with five children. And he often suffered from kidney stones. One day he was particularly gloomy. His wife Katie loved to get under his skin, so she approached him wearing a black mourner's veil. Luther said, "Who died?" Katie said, "God died. I just assumed by the way you're acting that God has certainly died."

Luther returned to his study and carved the Latin phrase "*vivit*" in the wood of his desk. It means, "He lives." Whenever he got discouraged he would look at that word and he would be invigorated.

James gives us another insight into the power of perseverance. "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) There are many rewards we will receive as followers of Jesus Christ. One is called a crown of life. But we only receive that reward if we endure to the end.

But the Christian life is so much more than pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. There's also what I call steak-on-your-plate-while-you-wait. But we must understand that God passes out His promises when we are ready to receive them. His timing is impeccable. There are promises God has for you, but you may not be mature enough to receive them. That's why we keep growing.

For instance, one day after VBS, I took my grandson, Grant, to lunch and we hung out and had some fun. We went bowling over at the FLC and I gave him a tour of all our church buildings. He's seven years old. At one point standing in the Worship Center he looked around and asked, "Dee Dee, are you the founder of this Church?" I smiled and said, "No, Grant. Jesus founded the church. I just work for Him here."

We were up in my office and he was digging through the drawers in my desk. He found a little pocketknife my dad had given me. He got excited and said, "Oh, Dee Dee, can I have this?" I said, "Grant, you're a little young to handle a pocketknife right now. I'm afraid you might cut yourself." But I'll give it to you one day!" He said, "You promise?" I said, "I promise." In the same way, God gives His promises to us when we are ready to receive them. The second UP of perseverance is Cheer up! Life will get better. It will get better in this world, and it will be MUCH better in the next world!

3. LOOK UP! JESUS IS COMING.

That's another reason to persevere. The Bible says, "For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and not delay.'" (Hebrews 10:37)

The early Christians lived in the excited expectation that Jesus was going to return. That was a promise that gave them strength in the midst of their suffering and persecution. And all of us who know and love Jesus should be filtering everything that happens in this world through the filter of the fact that one day Jesus is going to split the skies and we will see him face to face.

Paul wrote to Titus that expecting Jesus is our glorious hope. "We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:12-13 NKJV) Notice again the Bible says that appearing of our great God is the same as the appearing of the Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus is God.

Jesus didn't return during the lifetime of the first generation of believers, but they went to their deaths thinking it could happen any moment.

Today whenever someone sees a person on the street with a sandwich board sign that says, "Repent. Jesus is coming soon." They are considered a nut. And even when well-educated Christians talk about Jesus returning to planet earth, there are plenty of scoffers who giggle at our claim. Comics make fun of the idea of Jesus returning. But we shouldn't be surprised. The Apostle Peter predicted this centuries ago. He wrote, "Scoffers will come in the last days scoffing and following their own evil desires, saying, 'Where is his 'coming' that he promised? Ever since our ancestors fell asleep, all things continue as they have been since the beginning of creation.'" (2 Peter 3:3-4 CSB)

These modern skeptics say, "All of the early Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, including Peter, Paul, and Mary. They were wrong. It's been 2,000 years. Where is He?"

Yes, it's been 2,000 years, but that's according to man's timetable. We're all creatures of time and space. Our entire lives, we've followed the rhythm of sixty seconds making one minute, and sixty minutes making one hour. Twenty-four hours make a day, and 365 days make a year. But God isn't limited to our sense of time or space. Just a few verses later Peter writes, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Peter 3:8) That is not a mathematical formula that says a thousand years equals one day. It says a day is LIKE a thousand years. To us, it seems as if Jesus has been gone for 2,000 years, but with God, it's only been a couple of days. It's as if Jesus went home last Friday!

One of the most brilliant minds of the 20th Century was the former agnostic, C.S. Lewis, who wrote the brilliant series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He wrote this about the return of Christ. "God is going to invade this earth in force. For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen whether we realized it before or not." (*The Case for Christianity*) So STAND UP when life knocks you down. CHEER UP, life is going to get better, and LOOK UP, Jesus is coming. The final UP of perseverance is

4. DON'T GIVE UP! FINISH THE RACE.

After talking about the deserters in Chapter 10, the writer identifies those who remain faithful. "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." (Hebrews 10:39)

Perseverance means you never quit.

In Hebrews 12, we'll dig into the truth of how the Christian life is like running a race. As Paul neared the end of his life, he wrote these words in his last letter, "The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:6-7)

I've never run a full marathon, but I've read about runners who talk about how there's a point where they hit the wall. It's not a real wall; it is a wall of fatigue. Most runners say it happens around mile 20 of the 26-mile race. One runner described it this way, "Your energy runs out, your legs can become numb, muscle coordination is difficult and doubt begins to set in. And you wonder, will I ever reach the finish line?" Another runner said, "I felt like an elephant had jumped out of a tree onto my shoulders and he was making me carry him the rest of the way."

But runners aren't the only ones who hit the wall. All of us go through times when we hit the wall and feel as if we can't go on. And the thing is we usually don't see it coming. But perseverance means you keep your eyes on Jesus and keep on moving forward in faith. You refuse to give up.

The most successful people in life refused to quit. As a student, Thomas Edison was told he was too stupid to learn anything. He was fired from his first two jobs. But he never gave up. While inventing the electric light he tried 1,000 different filaments before he succeeded. Henry Ford failed and went broke five times before he finally succeeded in making an automobile.

Think about the products we use. Formula 409 was the 409th formula tried for the cleaning fluid. Somebody refused to give up. WD-40 stands for "Water Displacement" and it was the 40th attempted formula; someone refused to give up. And think about Preparation H. Uh, well, we won't go there, but you get the point. Somebody refused to give up!

CONCLUSION

Let me give you my formula for perseverance: Persistence + Patience. Persistence keeps you going and patience keeps you believing that the prize is still ahead; just wait for it. Persistence and Patience are like two wings of an airplane. You need them both to keep you flying. Whatever you attempt in life, whether it is an educational degree, a hobby, a career, a marriage, and especially in your walk with the Lord, Persistence and Patience will carry you through.

All of the Bible heroes had to practice perseverance. Consider Joseph in the book of Genesis. His brothers hated him. They beat him up and threw him in a pit. But he said, "I'm going to STAND UP when life knocks me down." Joseph was sold into slavery and reported as having died. He was taken to Egypt but he said, "I'm going to CHEER UP because I believe my life is going to get better." It didn't get better immediately. He was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. But even in prison he demonstrated perseverance. He said, "I'm going to LOOK UP to a King who can deliver me." And the King, Pharaoh did release him. And for the rest of his life Joseph said, "I'm not going to GIVE UP because I'm going to finish the race!" His life was full of disappointment, but when he was Prime Minister of Egypt, he looked back on all of it and said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)

God has so many promises for you; so don't give up! Persevere and you will receive the promise!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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