

Introduction

For eight summers during my growing up years I went to an all girls sports camp for 2 months each summer. We had to choose the special name we would be called at camp (and I pass on making that name known☺) and choose an Indian motto that we painted on our ceremonial dress. I chose an archery target with the 3 symmetrical circles one inside the other. The motto was “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again,” a motto of perseverance. I wasn’t a Christian yet, so this motto was all my responsibility to make work. But once God’s hope and the resident staying power of the Holy Spirit became mine as a Christian, the motto has served me well over the decades. The motto is not unlike the Marine Corps motto of *Semper Fidelis* – always faithful. This is our goal as Christians- we pledge faithfulness to the Lord – in all of life and all of life’s circumstances.

However, the concept of perseverance does not conjure up a kick-up-one’s-heels celebratory lifestyle, but it is a fruit of the Spirit: “joy that overflows,^[c] peace that subdues,^[d] patience^[d] that endures, kindness^[e] in action, a life full of virtue,^[f] faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit.^[g] Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.” (Passion Translation). Perseverance involves “patience that endures” combined with “faith that prevails.” It is a mark of a mature Christian believer who is firmly established in a life with God, and can keep trusting God in the hard times while expecting to see these times of sorrow or dryness or siege transformed into a spacious place (Ps. 18:18-19). This is not “pie in the sky” kind of wishful thinking; this is commitment to the Lord in the midst of the most difficult circumstances.

2020 has been a harrowing year - a year that has brought the distinction between Christian faith-filled perseverance and the teeth-gritting, downward spiraling endurance of people outside Christ who have little access to God’s supernatural strength and hope. Life without God in the midst of great difficulty and continual change and upheaval can be grim indeed. And this factor has multiplied exponentially as the resurging Covid 19 virus keeps taking people’s lives and creating havoc in country after country. Most of the members of New Hope Global can tell their own stories of the difficulties of this year.



But, this graphic says it well: Perseverance is going forward, surmounting every obstacle that would stop us.

All because of the Lord.

Our difficulties are never the end of the story for the Christian. We can have perseverance no matter what when our confidence is in Christ alone and we experience His interventions in every trying situation.

This week the book I reviewed is an anthology of excerpts from noted Christian writers of the 20th century. Stories from people like Corrie Ten Boom and Charles Colson. Their models raise the bar high for Spirit-filled perseverance and inspire confidence in the same God who helped both of them. Their model inspired the theme of this week’s sermon.

Two models of perseverance

In their excerpts in the book, Corrie was recounting the horrors of life at Ravensbruck, the Nazi death camp for women in World War II. Chuck Colson was recounting the inhumane conditions of life at Walla Walla Prison, reputed to be the worst prison system in the US. After what seemed hopeless and numbing evil, both those situations eventually turned around. The defeat of the Nazis in World War II brought liberation to the survivors of Nazi death camps, and a bold Christian presence and continual political advocacy gradually brought light and humane conditions to the inmates at Walla Walla. What struck me, as I read those accounts again, is the dogged

faith with which Corrie and Chuck both held on to God until those changes happened. Here are a few excerpts from their stories as recounted in *Spiritual Witness* (Crossway 1991):

Corrie ten Boom – “As we trooped back through the shower room door, the SS men ran their hands over every prisoner, front, back, and sides. The woman ahead of me was searched three times. Behind me, Betsie was searched. No hand touched me. At the exit door to the building was a second ordeal, a line of women guards examining each prisoner again. I slowed down as I reached them, but the Aufseherin in charge shoved me roughly by the shoulder. “Move Along! You’re holding up the line!” And so Betsie and I arrived at Barracks 8 in the small hours of the morning, bringing not only the Bible, [and her sweater and vitamins] but a new knowledge of the power of Him whose story it was.” (Sherwood Eliot Wirt, ed., *Spiritual Witness: Classic Christian Writings of the 20th Century*. Crossway Books, 199, p.175-176).

Charles W. Colson – “We need constantly to be reminded that our efforts, vital as they are, will never bring utopia to this earth. Walla Walla after all, is still bleak. It is still a prison filled with the angry, desperate, broken lives of those who seem unable to live in society. But it has changed. Because of God’s power, not ours, Walla Walla is a ‘concrete’ example of the kingdom of God transforming places of hopelessness in the kingdom of man. Justice and hope can now be found where there was once only inequality and despair. Should Christians get involved in political issues and social reform? Can anyone look at the story of Walla Walla and believe otherwise?” (Ibid., *Spiritual Witness*, p.263).

God’s promises that empower our perseverance

The Bible often addresses the fear and faint-heartedness that plagues people in hard times. God understands these tumultuous, traitorous feelings in the Christian. And so, in these contexts, His promises of presence and peace and power are particularly precious. Here are a few. Notice the way perseverance is described:

Ps. 138:1-3: “I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; before the “gods” I will sing your praise. I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and faithfulness, For you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.” NIV

(Bold and stouthearted – there’s a refreshing way to think about perseverance!)

I Cor. 15:58: “So now, beloved ones,^[a] stand firm and secure. Live your lives with an unshakable confidence. We know that we prosper and excel in every season by serving the Lord,^[b] because we are assured that our union with the Lord makes our labor productive with fruit that endures.” Passion.
(firm. Secure, with unshakable confidence and assurance and lasting fruit.)

Col. 1:21-23: “Even though you were once distant from him, living in the shadows of your evil thoughts and actions, he reconnected you back to himself. *He released his supernatural peace to you* through the sacrifice of his own body as the sin-payment on your behalf so that you would dwell in his presence. And now there is nothing between you and Father God, for he sees you as holy, flawless, and restored,²³ if indeed you continue to advance in faith, assured of a firm foundation to grow upon. Never be shaken from the hope of the gospel you have believed in.” Passion.

(assured of a firm foundation, never shaken from the hope of the gospel, dwelling His presence– all because of God’s work on your behalf.)

2 Thes. 3:13: “Brothers and sisters, don’t ever grow weary in doing what is right.”
(never growing weary)

Heb. 10:23-25²³ “So now we must cling tightly to the hope that lives within us, knowing that God always keeps his promises!^[a] ²⁴ Discover creative ways to encourage others^[b] and to motivate them toward acts of compassion,

doing beautiful works as expressions of love. ²⁵ This is not the time to pull away and neglect^[c] meeting together, as some have formed the habit of doing, because we need each other!” Passion.
(clinging tightly to the hope within us, continuing in acts of love and encouragement, in community!)

Perseverance is a choice we make as Christians, but it is a choice empowered by God’s work on our behalf and the firm foundation He has given us in His Word. In the Hebrews passage notice that it is also a communal gift. I like this graphic of perseverance for that reason. Scaling a wall or climbing a mountain – all images of going over the obstacles that would stop us – takes a community.



So, even if we are separated physically in this Covid season, we can still keep extending the words of encouragement, the power of our prayers, and the love of Jesus to one another to keep us all persevering, moving forward with the Lord. I have loved the ways our church has done that through messaging one another in WhatsApp and through our Zoom meeting times. The fruit of this communal life is seen in story after story. Evan’s new RI work visa is the latest triumph. It is such a source of praise!!!

Two Songs of Response

Here are two songs that lift up our God and His work that enables us to persevere. The first comes from Corrie Ten Boom’s story:

The Hiding Place

In a time of trouble, in a time forlorn, there is a hiding place where hope is born.

In a time of danger, when our faith is proved, there is a hiding place where we are loved.

Refrain: There is a hiding place, a strong protective space where God provides the grace to persevere

For nothing can remove us from the Father’s love, though all may change, yet nothing changes here.

In a time of sorrow, in a time of grief, there is a hiding place to give relief.

In a time of weakness, in a time of fear, there is a hiding place where God is near.

Refrain. (Words and music: Bryan Jeffery Leech)

Our God

Water You turned into wine, opened the eyes of the blind; there’s no one like You, none like You.

Into the darkness You shine, out of the ashes we rise, there’s no one like you. none like you.

Refrain: Our God is greater, our God is stronger, God, you are higher than any other.

Our God is Healer, awesome in power, our God, our God.

And if our God is for us, then who could ever stop us, and is our God is with us, then what could be against us, then what can stand against? Refrain: Our God is greater, our God is stronger, God, you are higher than any other. Our God is Healer, awesome in power, our God, our God. (words and music: Chris Tomlin.)

Amen.

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