

October 3, 2010

**"PERSISTING IN FAITH"
Part 4: 50 Days of Faith Series
Hebrews 11:17-12:3**

Did you ever wonder why the Bible has so many stories about people in it? What was God thinking when he put all those people in the Bible and the things they went through? Believe it or not, God had a purpose behind including them. The lives of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Jabez, David, Elijah, Daniel, Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, the blind man Bartimaeus, on and on and on the list goes. They were all put there to encourage us in our faith. Hebrews 12:1 says, *'Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.'* The author is talking here about all those people whose stories have been recorded for us in the Bible.

God gives us hundreds of stories of people in the Bible in order to strengthen us in our faith and help us to persevere in our faith. God wants us to finish this life with our faith intact and not lose our faith along the way. He wants us to finish what we started. He always finishes what He starts, but that's not always true of human beings. We start a lot of things we never finish. We start out doing something and we get tired or bored or distracted or hurt or angry or disillusioned along the way, and we never finish what we set out to do. The highway of our lives is strewn with rubble from all of our unfinished projects, un-kept promises, and broken commitments. Why? -Because we get discouraged and we lose our way.

The Bible tells us there are four things we need to do if we want to persist in our faith and make it through this life with our faith intact.

FIRST, you need to REMOVE THE DISTRACTIONS that are getting in the way of your faith; the things that are competing for your loyalty. Get them out of your way. Hebrews 12:1 says, *'Let us run the race that is set before us and never give up. We should remove from our lives anything that would get in the way and the sin that so easily holds us back.'* We are to get rid of anything that separates us from the object of our faith which is Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us that the key to persisting in faith is to simplify our lives by getting rid of the distractions that cause us to stumble and fall. Remove the diversions; eliminate the time wasters that keep you from finishing what you started. You've started off believing in Christ, now keep on believing by removing the distractions.

The biggest distraction of all is your past . Your past can load you down with shame and guilt, with resentment and bitterness over things you've done and things done to you. Carrying around all that shame and guilt for your past sins, and all the anger and bitterness for past hurts, weighs you down and wears you out. When you refuse to be forgiven and when you refuse to forgive, it keeps you from running the race God has set planned for your life.

The apostle Paul had a lot of regrets he could have let weigh him down. If he had, we wouldn't have half the books in the New Testament because he never would have gotten around to writing them. Before becoming a believer Paul was running around having Christians put to death. Just

think how bad he felt after becoming a believer. Just think how he must have regretted doing all that once he met Christ. But listen to what he says, *'Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead I strain to reach the end of the race.'* (Philippians 3:13-14) He refused to let his sins or the sins of others keep him from running the race God uniquely designed for him to run.

We, too, must let go of the past and focus on being the people of faith God has called us to be. Otherwise the past will distract us and entangle us and keep us from being the people of faith God calls us to be 'people who believe in the forgiveness of God; people who believe God can make something beautiful out of our lives. Isaiah 43:18 says, *'Don't dwell on the past.'* Focusing on the past will only be a distraction. You've got to focus on what's ahead 'what God can do with your life if you surrender it to Him.

That brings us to the SECOND thing necessary for persist in faith . That is: REMEMBER THE REWARD God has waiting for you at the end of this life. If you take your eyes off Christ and forget the reward waiting for you, you'll simply give up along the way. If you forget what God has promised you in the future, the reward He has waiting for you, you'll end up thinking, 'Why make the effort?' The only motivation that will enable you to persist in faith is the sure and solid conviction that God has an eternal reward waiting for you.

The Bible says *'To win the contest you must deny yourself many things that would keep you from doing your best. We do it for a heavenly reward that never disappears. So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step 'a heavenly reward, personally rewarded by God .'* (1 st Cor. 9:25-26)

I've talked to a lot of people about what heaven is going to be like and how wonderful it's going to be. I've discovered that for many people the idea of heaven isn't something that encourages them, but rather it worries them. They wonder, 'Am I going to make it to heaven?'

The reward that awaits us in heaven is based on something called grace. Jesus paid my penalty and died my death. My place in heaven is guaranteed because of grace given to me as a gift. I receive that gift by believing in what Jesus has done for me on the cross. The fact that I have faith is even a gift from God.

Our getting into heaven is an act of God's grace. On the other hand, the rewards we receive in heaven are directly related to how we live our lives here on earth. Only the things we do and say and think that are motivated by our faith in Christ will be rewarded in heaven.

There's something else you should know. Everyone needs something to look forward to. That's the way God made us. He hard wired us to look forward to a reward. The problem is we don't look far enough into the future to the real reward that awaits us. Instead we desperately try to reward ourselves along the way. If we're having a tough day at work, we start to think of how we can reward ourselves on the way home. If we're having a tough week we think, at least there's the weekend to do something really rewarding. If we're having a tough year we think, at least I've got my vacation to look forward to. But what do you do when you're having a tough life? What do you do when the weekend isn't long enough and the vacation isn't frequent enough to satisfy your desire for a reward? There are times in life when the only reward big enough to keep us going is the promise of eternal reward that is ours through faith. The Bible says, *'Don't drag your feet. Be like those who stay the course with committed faith and then get everything promised to them.'* (Hebrews 6:12)

Many of God's promises are for the present life. He promises to lead, guide and direct us. He promises never to leave or forsake us. He promises to provide for our needs and watch over us. He promises to love and cherish us. God's promises sustain us as we go through life, running the race he has set before us. But what do we do when things get really tough? The only thing that can sustain us is the promise of eternal life and the reward that awaits us in heaven.

THE THIRD thing we must do to persist in faith is to: **RESIST DISCOURAGEMENT** . There are plenty of things to discourage you, but you've got to resist giving in to discouragement. Maybe you're discouraged about your health. Maybe you're discouraged about your finances. Maybe you're discouraged about your marriage or about a son or daughter. Maybe you're discouraged about your job. There's something very important you should know about discouragement. Discouragement is a choice. Nobody can force you to be discouraged. We have to give in to discouragement in order to be discouraged. If you're discouraged, if you feel like giving up, it's because you're giving in to discouraging thoughts. The Bible tells us to resist discouragement. Fight against it. Discouragement is Satan's favorite tool for making you ineffective as a witness for Christ in the world. Discouragement is Satan's favorite tool for making you want to give up believing in Christ. The Bible warns, *'Let us not get tired of doing what is right, for after a while we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't get discouraged and give up.'* (Galatians 6:9)

When we start to get discouraged, that's when we need to cry out to God for help, The author of Psalm 94 wrote, *'Lord, when doubts fill my mind, when my heart is in turmoil, quiet me and give me renewed hope and cheer.'* (Psalm 94:19) He didn't wait until he was filled with doubt and despair before he began to pray for hope and encouragement. He prayed for God's help while he had the strength to pray so that when things got really difficult, and he didn't have the strength to pray, he could rely on his earlier prayers and God's faithfulness to answer them. Once you're overcome with discouragement you wouldn't have the strength to pray. You need to pray ahead like the Psalmist.

God really does want us to succeed in our faith. If we are to succeed and finish this life with our faith intact, we will have to rely on Him for help. The Bible promises us that, *'He [God] who began the good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in His grace until His task within you is finally finished.'* (Philippians 1:6)

God promises to help us persist in faith, but we have to do our part. Where do you need to be more persistent? Is it in keeping a daily quiet time with God where you read God's Word and listen for Him to speak to you? Maybe it's in praying for your family, your marriage, your church, and the world around you. Maybe you need to be more persistent in sharing your faith with others, especially those you deeply love. Maybe you need to be more faithful in giving your time and talent to the Lord. Maybe you need to be a better steward of your financial resources. Maybe you need to be a better steward of your physical body through exercise and diet. Maybe you need to be more persistent in controlling your anger or your words or thought life or actions. Maybe you need to be more persistent in trusting God with your pain, your problems, your fears, your disappointment.

If you want to persist in faith you'll need to do one more thing. You'll need to **RENEW YOURSELF DAILY** . I'm talking very practical here. If you're going to finish this life with your faith intact then you'll have to renew yourself daily.

First , you'll have to renew yourself physically by getting proper rest. The Bible says, '*God wants His loved ones to get their proper rest.*'(Psalm 127:2) The living Bible paraphrase of this verse says, '*It's stupid for you to get up so early and stay up so late for God wants His loved ones to get their proper rest.*'Are you getting the rest you need? If you're getting discouraged, try getting more rest! Along with this, you'll need to eat right and exercise regularly. Your body is the temple of God. You need to take care of it!

Second , you'll need to renew yourself spiritually. The Bible says, '*This is why we never give up. Our spirits are being renewed every day.*'(II Cor. 4:16) In order to resist discouragement, you've got to spend quality time with God every day, reading His Word and applying it to your life. Daily you've got to refocus your life. What does that mean? The Bible tells us, '*keep your eyes fixed on Jesus for it is on Him that our faith depends from beginning to end.*'Hebrews 12:2