

Persevering

Foundations for the New Normal, July 25-26 | Psalm 121, Hebrews 12;1-2, 7-11

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THE NEW NORMAL PULLS US TO GIVE UP.

You've given up so much during this season.

Sports have taken a break. Kids' sports seasons have been modified or on hold. And until this week, most of us had very few sports to watch. Now baseball and basketball are back (for now).

Vacations have been on hold.

Many of us have given up at least some of our time with family and friends. We've had to keep everyone safe, so some of us haven't been able to see our loved ones. That's been rough.

Many of us have given up the ability to focus on our work, because we've been working from home with all the distractions we've got at home. (Kids, thanks for letting your parents work!)

Now, we may to give up the Olympics next year as well!

Earlier this year the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo were postponed until 2021. The coronavirus was simply too dangerous to allow fans and athletes to gather.

This past week the President of the Organizing Committee said that, if conditions haven't changed by next summer, the games won't happen then either.

The International Olympic Committee responded that if they can't go ahead on schedule next summer, they will be cancelled altogether.

We've given up so much during this season. It can be discouraging.

However, we are children (sons and daughters) of God.

Last week we started to look at how the Bible calls Jesus' followers sons and daughters of God.

Interestingly, we weren't "born" children of God. The Bible describes it as being "adopted."

John takes it one step further and says that we were actually "born again" as children of God. **John 1:12-13** says:

But to all who did receive him [the Word of God, Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

The amazing thing is that being adopted or born again doesn't depend on us! It's something that happens because of the power of God.

So, that relationship can never be taken away from us. That's good news, because it informs how we think about ourselves and guides how we act, especially during these days.

Here's a statement I'd like us all to cling to during this series: **When we know who we are, we can act rather than react.** Knowing who we are guides how we think and act.

Because we are children of God, we are called to persevere.

To persevere means to continue on with a course of action even in the face of difficulty, opposition, or discouragement.

Perseverance can sound like a very “me” driven characteristic.

It’s actually an important biblical virtue we need desperately right now, because these days call for us to persevere.

So how can we do that? How can we persevere? Today I’d like to suggest to you four mental shifts that help us persevere. These all arise out of being sons and daughters of God:

1. FORGET THE LIE THAT YOU’RE FORGOTTEN.

Psalm 121:1-4 calls us to make our first mental shift—Forget the lie that you’re forgotten.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

Psalm 121 is a “Song of Ascent,” which sets an important context.

There are 15 “songs of ascent” in the Psalms, Psalms 120-134.

These are songs are probably meant to be sung as pilgrims made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem for the holiest feasts in the Old Testament calendar.

They may have been sung as travelers ascended the Temple Mount, or they may have been sung as travelers made their way to Jerusalem, a trip that was “up” from every direction.

As we look up, we are reminded that the LORD helps us.

As pilgrims would make their way to Jerusalem, toward the Temple, and toward God, they were always looking “up” toward God.

As they would look “up,” pilgrims literally thought about where their help came from. They needed “help” for the journey, because the journey was frequently unsafe with robbers along the way. Pilgrims frequently traveled in caravans, but still they longed for God’s protection.

Psalm 121:1-4 reminds us that God helps us, his people, his children.

Verse 2 reminds us that the LORD our helper is the one who made heaven and earth, the Creator of everything!

The LORD helper promises that he will not let our foot be moved. To say that our foot won’t be moved means that we won’t stumble as we walk. We won’t be blown around, lose our footing, or get weak. We will walk confidently and strongly.

Then there's more good news: The LORD doesn't take a *break*.

There's a subtle distinction here: Psalm 121 says that God will neither slumber nor sleep.

This is more than poetic repetition.

To say that God won't sleep means that God won't ever intentionally quit paying attention and tend to his own needs.

To say that God won't slumber means that God won't even doze off even for a minute.

God won't take a break (even a short break) from helping us.

Forget the lie that you're forgotten.

Psalm 121:1-4 reminds us that God won't forget his children!

However, if you're in danger of giving up today, there is a good chance that you've begun to tell yourself that God has forgotten us, that he has abandoned us.

It's easy to believe, as long as you don't say it out loud.

Because if you say it out loud, then you have to ask whether it's true or not.

Can God forget his children? Well, we human parents can't forget our children!

When we're young parents and sleep-deprived, we have nightmares about leaving our children somewhere, but when we're awake, we can't ever truly forget our children.

We can send them to daycare for a day and focus on our work.

We can leave them with family members or friends to get away on a date or for a weekend.

But as long as we draw breath, those of us who are parents can never forget our children.

If we who are imperfect parents can't forget our children, how could we even consider the lie that our Heaven Father has forgotten us? The Bible says that he won't. So, forget the lie that you're forgotten.

2. DEPEND RATHER THAN DESPAIR.

Psalm 121 Verses 4-8 call us to make our second mental shift—"Depend rather than despair"—because the LORD will keep us.

Behold, he who **keeps** Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your **keeper**;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will **keep** you from all evil;
he will **keep** your life.

The LORD will **keep**
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

The word "keep" or "keeper" is used five times in these short verses, and the word appeared once in verse 3. The Psalmist wants us to know that God is our keeper!

The Hebrew word that's translated as "keep" or "keeper" here means "to guard, to cause to remain the same." In other words, the Lord preserves.

The LORD will keep us from every threat.

When verse 5 says that the LORD is the "shade" on our right hands, what that implies is that the LORD is our protector. The LORD is the thing that comes between us and anything that would do us harm, the way that a shade comes between us and light.

And when verse 6 says that the sun will not strike us by day or the moon by night, it means that God will protect us from the sun and all dangers of the day. And God will protect us from the moon and all the dangers of the night.

Verse seven sums it all up by saying that the LORD will keep us from all evil.

In other words, the LORD will protect us from every threat as we make our way to him.

The LORD will keep all that we are.

Verse seven ends by saying that the LORD will keep our "life."

That statement is more important than it seems at first.

The word for "life" there goes back to Genesis 2, which we studied last week.

In Genesis 2, the LORD God took dust from the ground and formed it into a shape. Then the LORD God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the dust-sculpture.

Then and only then did the man become a living thing. It takes a body shaped by God and breath given by God to make a living human.

The word for "living creature" in Genesis 2 is the same word that the Psalmist uses right here.

So the LORD will keep our body and breath, all that we are.

The LORD will keep us for all time.

In English Psalm 121 ends with the simple phrase, "from this time forth and forevermore."

That means that the LORD will keep us as we come and go from now on.

But forevermore is more than we can imagine.

It is everything from this moment into the future. For all of the future God will keep us.

But the word also stretches into the past. For all of the past, God has kept us already.

And it stretches across the cosmos. In all places, God is keeping us.

It's "all of it," eternity in the biggest sense of the word!

The LORD will keep us for all time.

Kids sleep through storms at night, because they've internalized this mental shift.

When severe storms rumble through at night, parents wake up.

(At least, parents who are not me wake up! My wife has to wake me up!)

But most kids sleep right through the storm. Why?

Because they feel safe. They know that someone else is going to make everything okay.

Someone else is going to keep the house safe, and that will keep them safe.

So they sleep knowing that they're cared for.

If you can picture a child sleeping through the storm in your mind, if you can in a sense become that child, then you've made this mental shift: The LORD will keep us from every threat, all that we are, for all time. Depend on God rather than despair.

3. GET RID OF WHAT'S WEIGHING YOU DOWN.

Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us about the third mental shift—"Get rid of what's weighing you down."

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

There are two powerful models in these verses.

The first models are the people that Hebrews calls "a cloud of witnesses."

In the previous chapter (chapter 11), we were given examples of these witnesses. They are heroes of the faith like Abraham who had faith in God that led them to live obedient lives despite great difficulty even though they hadn't been given the opportunity to see Jesus or receive the Holy Spirit. They are all examples to us of what persevering looks like. They ran the race with endurance or perseverance.

The second model is Jesus himself. Hebrews 12 reminds us of more about him. Jesus is the one in whom we have faith. Jesus also ran the race in front of him with endurance or perseverance. In fact, Hebrews reminds us that Jesus' race involved great suffering on the cross and that Jesus faced that suffering and shame because he had in front of him the joy of overcoming sin and providing us with eternal life and adoption as sons and daughters of God!

Hebrews sets up the cloud of witnesses and Jesus and says, "Look at them! They did it! They ran the race in front of them with endurance and perseverance."

If we're going to "run with endurance," we need to get rid of what's weighing us down.

Hebrews specifically mentions sin.

Sin damages us! It damages our relationship with God and saps us of spiritual vitality.

It robs us of the endurance we need to run the race in front of us.

We need to get rid of sin and everything else that saps our spiritual vitality if we're going to persevere and run the race in front of us.

I lost weight while I was recuperating from a running injury.

Before my injury, I was brand new to running.

In fact, I started running after being away from it for nearly a decade.

I pushed myself, because I knew at the time that I was overweight. I wanted to run to help myself lose weight, but I pushed too hard too fast.

I bruised some tendons in my knee and could barely walk for a while. It took me over a month to get back to the point that I could run more than a mile.

During that month I dieted strictly and lost 20 pounds.

So, the next time I went running, I was 20 pounds lighter than I had been the last time I ran. I felt like a gazelle running! I was light on my feet and could breathe! It was awesome!

Let's get real about what's weighing us down right now.

There's some stuff weighing us all down.

It may be sin itself that's weighing you down right now. If that's the case, Hebrews is telling you to set it aside if you want to keep running this race with perseverance.

Doing that means confessing it to God, leaving it with him, and walking away from it.

We aren't going to be able to run this race well, and we certainly won't finish well, if we've got sin weighing us down.

But there are other things that can weigh us down as well.

Listening to lies can weigh us down. We've got to be willing to let lies go.

Listening to hate can weigh us down. There's a lot of angry, hateful speech swirling around right now. If we listen to it, it will lead us to sin and will weigh us all down.

Listening to anxiety can weigh us down as well. And there is so much anxiety going around right now! It weighs us down.

If we've got sin, anger, frustration, lies, anxiety, or hate weighing us down, we won't persevere. Let's get rid of what's weighing us down.

4. TRAIN TO REPRESENT THE FAMILY.

Hebrews 12:7-11 shows us the fourth mental shift we need to make if we're going to persevere—"Train to represent the family."

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12 asks us to *think of hardship differently* about things that test our perseverance.

I'm grateful that Hebrews 12 is honest about troubles and trials. They're real. They're not just "in our heads."

But Hebrews 12 asks us to think about troubles and trials differently.

We can look at them as random, uncontrolled things that come our way.

Or we can look at them as part of a process in life that shapes us.

Without minimizing our troubles and trials or our pain, Hebrews 12 asks us to look at whatever we're facing, whatever tests our perseverance, as discipline.

Discipline has a point. It's directed somewhere, preparing us for eternity and for God.

Hebrews 12 compares our Heavenly Father to our earthly parents.

Our earthly parents discipline us if they love us, because not disciplining us leaves us lacking.

But our earthly parents discipline us imperfectly. We usually mean well, but sometimes we get things wrong. (As a father myself, I know exactly what Hebrews means!)

Our Heavenly Father does it right and out of love.

Hebrews 12 also reminds us that the goal is to have and show the “family resemblance.”

We are children of God, members of God’s family. Hebrews 12 reminds us of that.

But becoming part of God’s family is the easy part. God adopts us.

But now that we’re part of God’s family, we want to start showing the “family resemblance.”

We want the image of God in us to come out; we want to look like our older brother, Jesus.

Verse 10 tells us that discipline pushes that process forward. Verse 10 says that discipline comes along for “our good” so that we can share in “his [God’s] holiness.”

If we let discipline do its work, then verse 11 tells us that we get the “peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

Instead of constantly fighting for God’s righteousness to show up and show through in us, we see that it comes out in us a little more naturally.

We start to show the family resemblance.

Prince Charles’ investiture as the Prince of Wales in 1969 reminded everyone who he was.

Fifty-one years ago this summer, Great Britain’s Queen Elizabeth met her son, Charles, at Caernarfon Castle in Wales.

A parade of nobles, dressed for the occasion, led Prince Charles into the castle.

He knelt before the Queen.

Someone read her order naming him the Prince of Wales aloud in Welsh.

The Queen gave the prince a sword, a crown, a ring, a gold rod, and a robe.

Prince Charles took an oath of loyalty to the Queen, then took his place next to his mother.

In some ways the ceremony was a carefully choreographed event, designed to remind the people of Wales that he was their Prince, the Prince of Wales.

Charles’ investiture also said that he is a true Windsor, a member of the royal family, a team player, the next in line, and heir to the British throne.

The family resemblance is unmistakable.

The world is longing for us to represent our family.

Persevering is difficult when all we’re doing is trying to hold on.

There’s a quote that is often attributed to Franklin Roosevelt. “When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.”

That’s one way to look at perseverance. When you feel like giving up, don’t. But the problem with that idea of perseverance is that all we’re doing is hanging on! And if we just keep hanging on, eventually we’re going to get tired and let go.

We need something more! This fourth and final mindset change gives us that something more—“Train to represent the family.”

Hanging on may not be enough to keep us persevering for the long run.

But representing the family, doing the work that sons and daughters of God are supposed to do, that can keep us going.

All of creation is waiting for us to make this mindset shift

In **Romans 8:18-19**, Paul tells us that creation is waiting breathlessly for us to act like children of God and represent our family well:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

When we let discipline shape us into sons and daughters of God, we all win.

Creation wins. When we act like sons and daughters of God, the effects literally somehow ripple through the cosmos, blessing everything we touch.

We win. Representing our Heavenly Father sets an entirely higher standard for ourselves and gives us something more meaningful to shoot for than just not giving up.

Let's train to represent our family well, and we will persevere no matter what the days hold.