

Tough Faith Finishes the Race
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I want to begin by telling you about what is called the Greatest Last Place Finish of All Time. It happened at the Olympic Games of 1968 in Mexico City when John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania painfully hobbled into the Olympic Stadium – the last man to finish the marathon. The winner had already been crowned, and the victory ceremony was long finished. So the stadium was almost empty as Akhwari – alone, his leg bloody and bandaged – struggled to circle the track to the finish line.

John had fallen during the race badly cutting his knee and dislocating the joint. But he did not give up. He did not quit. He ran injured. He ran in pain. He ran knowing he would not win. He ran knowing he would in fact finish dead last. But he ran until he finished. He did not give up.

A reporter asked John why he had not quit since he had no chance of winning. He seemed confused by the question, but finally answered, “My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.”

This man was tough. What he did was a picture of what we should do as Christians. God did not call us to start the Christian life, but to finish it. Life is not a sprint, it’s a marathon. This makes me think of what the Apostle Paul said towards the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:6-7

I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Way too many Christians give up in tough times. Some even turn on God. But I don’t want that to be true of us. That’s why we’re in a series called Tough Faith for Tough Times.

We’ve seen that we all face tough times –
 but we can’t quit when tough times hit.
 We can’t give up when tough times show up!
 We can’t give up when tough times get even tougher!

Today I’m preaching on Tough Faith Finishes the Race.
 Hebrews 12:1-2 says:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Whatever race God has for you to run will take perseverance.
Perseverance is persistence – faithfulness – stick-to-it-tive-ness.

It means to hang on when you feel like letting go.
It means to hang in when you feel like giving in.
It means to hold on when you don't feel like going on.

Some of us give up way too easy.
We quit jobs because they don't pay enough -
Marriages because they don't play enough and -
Churches because they don't pray enough.

I'm not saying there's not a time to change jobs or churches – I am saying we need to develop some stick-to-it-ive-ness and not move unless God says move.

I want to let you in on a secret. I've been around a lot of successful people in my lifetime: successful business people, successful pastors, successful leaders. Successful people don't necessarily have the most talent or ability. In fact, if you hang around successful people, you will be surprised by how ordinary they are. Most of the time, what separates successful people from everyone else is this: they are the ones still going when everyone else has quit.

You see, successful people are not necessarily the smartest people. In fact, Albert Einstein said, "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer."

Successful people don't have less problems than others, they just persevere until they work through their problems.

Successful people don't have less discouragement than others, they just encourage themselves to keep on.

Successful people don't have less failures than others – in fact, many times they have more failures because they try more – but they don't let failure stop them. They don't quit. They persevere.

The word persevere literally means "through the severe." The word severe means "harsh, something that is difficult, really bad." To persevere means you go through tough times. You keep going no matter how difficult, how discouraging or how long it takes. You don't quit, you don't turn back, you don't give up.

One of the New Testament words for perseverance literally means "to remain under." It means when you are in a tough time, you don't just seek to escape from it, you seek to learn from it. James 1:2-4 says:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. This says that we will never reach spiritual maturity without perseverance! And you'll never develop perseverance without going through trials of many kinds.

James says to consider it pure joy when you go through tough times because tough times develop perseverance and perseverance develops spiritual maturity. That means you need an eternal perspective that sees the reward of perseverance!

Some of us never mature because we give up too easily. Some of us never reach our goals because we give up too soon. We give up way too fast these days. When anything gets tough we want to quit: marriage – school – work – relationships – even faith.

Deb and I have been married 46 years. When some people hear that they say, “You sure are lucky.” As if luck had anything to do with staying together 46 years. No – it takes commitment and perseverance. Anything that succeeds takes perseverance that does not give up! Tough faith does not give up.

So what does it take to persevere? To go through the severe? According to the Bible – there are some things we need to persevere in in order to develop perseverance!

1- Tough faith finishes the race by persevering in prayer.

In Luke 18:1, Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

In this verse Jesus gives us two pieces of wisdom. He tells us what we should always do and what we should never do. What we should always do is pray. What we should never do is give up.

In years gone by we had a saying: Pray through. That meant to pray and keep on praying until you know that you know that you know God heard you and God answered.

Our generation needs to rediscover the difference between praying for and praying through. Sometimes praying for something is enough. But there are certain circumstances that require us to take hold of the horns of the altar and refuse to let go until God answers.

- You intercede until God intervenes.
- You refuse to move until God moves.
- You pray through until God comes through with your breakthrough!

Miracles happen at the intersection of our weakness and God's power.

We pray out of weakness, but God answers in power!
 We pray with limited understanding, but God answers with omniscience!
 We pray in a place of defeat, God answers from the place of victory!
 We pray through because prayer gives us breakthroughs!

So - Don't just read the Bible. Start praying the promises. Don't just make a wish.
 Say a prayer! Don't just talk about your problem - Claim your promise! In all
 things - at all times - always pray and never ever give up!

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says: *Pray without ceasing.*
 The Amplified Version says: *Be unceasing in prayer (praying perseveringly).*

In other words, don't give up on prayer. It doesn't matter if you've been praying
 30 minutes, 30 hours, 30 days, 30 weeks, 30 months or 30 years - DON'T GIVE
 UP!! Tough faith keeps believing, keeps praying, keeps on keeping on!

2- Tough faith finishes the race by doing good in tough times

Galatians 6:9 says:

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a
 harvest if we do not give up.*

Tough times tempt you to stop doing good. The devil starts whispering, "What's
 the point of all these tough times? Why do you always have to be the one to do it
 right? Why are you the one dying to yourself and putting others before yourself
 and turning the other cheek and going the extra mile? Why don't you just start
 getting even with people and making them pay for what they've done?"

Come on! Am I the only one who ever has these kind of thoughts? No! We all do!
 Tough faith finishes the race by continuing to do good no matter what!
 Tough faith continues to do what is good no matter what others do!

Waiting is a part of life; it always has been and it always will be. However, God
 promises that we won't have to wait forever. Galatians 6:9 tells us we will reap a
 harvest if we do not to give up. Too many times we want to stop... but it's in our
 faithfulness that God is able to bless us.

Just think about that. What if you did give up? What does that get you?
 Probably nothing. The only sure way to fail is to give up.
 But your due season will come... If you don't give up.

So, continue to pray, continue to worship, continue to believe, continue to give,
 continue to love even when we are hated, continue to bless others when they
 curse you, continue to do good even when others are doing wrong!
 That takes some tough faith to do!

3- **Tough faith finishes the race by rejoicing in tough times**

Some of you are seeking the will of God for your life. I'm going to tell you what it is! 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

When should we rejoice? Always. When should we give thanks? In everything. That means there is never a time we should not rejoice and never a time we have nothing to be thankful for. So, in every situation, look for something to be joyful about. Habakkuk 3:17-19 says:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,

Now remember – when this was written the economy was based on agriculture. So – he is saying even if the economy fails, even if no one has a job, even if everything falls apart...

yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights.

We need to do the same thing when we face tough times – we need to add the yet. When you are in a tough time, add the word but and something to rejoice about. For instance:

I hate my job – BUT – thank God I am employed.

I don't like driving to work in this traffic – BUT – thank God I have a car.

I don't like every school subject – BUT – thank God I'm getting educated.

There's always something to rejoice in.

You may be down, but you're not out.

You may be sick, but you're still alive.

You may be tired, but you're not finished.

You may be discouraged, but you're not destroyed!

In Hebrews 11:27 Moses shows us how to tap into the power of perseverance.

By faith he (Moses) left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he kept his eyes on Him who is invisible.

Moses led an entire nation across the wilderness, through the Red Sea, to the Sinai Peninsula where they traveled around in circles for forty years, waiting to go into the Promised Land. How did he do it? Moses persevered because he kept His eyes on God.

Some of you today are at the point of quitting because you are looking at the wrong thing!

You feel ready to give up on your marriage because it's tough right now.

Or you're ready to give up on school because it just seems too hard.

Or you're ready to give up on that career, or that dream, or that hope.

Some of you want to give up because you are looking at your health instead of looking at the Healer!

Some of you want to give up because you are looking at your lack instead of looking at your Provider!

Some of you want to give up because you are looking at your problems rather than looking at the Answer!

Today, God is saying "Don't give up. Keep believing when you don't see it, Keep obeying when you don't understand it, Keep giving when you don't have it, and keep persisting when you don't feel like it."

You may have fallen down – but it's too soon to quit!

You may be hurt – but it's too soon to quit!

Other people might be telling you to quit – but it's too soon to quit!

Everybody else may have finished their race – but it's too soon to quit!

Moses could have quit after the 9th plague – but it would have been too soon to quit and he would have forfeited deliverance from Egypt. Thank God he didn't quit too soon!

Joshua could have quit after the 6th lap around Jericho – but it would have been too soon to quit and he would have missed out on a great victory! He kept going and the walls of Jericho fell. Thank God he didn't quit too soon!

And thank God, Jesus didn't quit too soon! The devil tried to tempt Him to short cut His ministry – but Jesus refused and said it's too soon to quit! His own disciples tried to talk Him out of the cross – but thank God He didn't listen to them - but told them it's too soon to quit!

Jesus Himself prayed to the Father for another way out – but for the joy set before Him He endured the cross! Thank God He didn't quit too soon!

Aren't you glad Jesus did not quit when things got tough for Him?

Jesus did not quit when He was arrested in the garden.

Jesus did not quit when His own friend betrayed Him.

Jesus did not quit when He was beaten, spit on and cursed at.

Jesus did not quit when a crown of thorns was pushed onto His head.

Jesus did not quit when nails were driven into His hands and feet!

Jesus did not quit when He was buried in a tomb!

Jesus showed us the power of perseverance!

So, the key to preserving is to keep your eyes on Jesus! Remember Hebrews 12:1-2 says:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus...

So when you're feeling weak, look to Jesus for He is strong.
When you're feeling lonely, look to Jesus for He will never leave us or forsake us.
When you feel needy, look to Jesus for He's our provider.

When you feel like giving up, look to Jesus and remind yourself that He who began a good work in you WILL complete it.
Remind yourself that Jesus never has and never will give up on you!

Next time you are tempted to quit remind yourself of that man hanging on the cross for you.
Look to Jesus discover the power of perseverance!
Look to Jesus and see how tough faith finishes the race!

Because Jesus refused to give up – His blood purchased for us forgiveness, salvation and eternal life!
Can you thank God that Jesus didn't quit too soon!

So offer up a sacrifice of praise – turn your tough times into praise.
And don't give up!
Whatever problems you have to work through, don't give up!
If you're doing what's right, but things are going wrong, don't give up.
If your moneys low, but your bill are high, don't give up!
Even if everyone else says you won't make it, the word says, "If God is for you, who can be against you!" So don't give up.

Remember that "He that endures to the end shall be saved."
So keep on keeping on.

Sometimes we will fall -- But we will not give up!
Sometimes we will get hurt – But we will not give up!
Sometimes we may run alone – But we will not give up!
Sometimes we may not get any recognition – But we will not give up!
Sometimes everyone we know may say quit - But we will not give up!
Sometimes we may feel like giving up – But we will not give up!

We will pray through tough times.
We will keep doing good in tough times.
We will rejoice in the Lord in tough times.
We have tough faith and tough faith doesn't just start the race!
God didn't call us to start a race – He called us to finish it!
That takes tough faith because tough faith finishes the race!