

Bible Studies for Life Series for April 20: Perseverance means going the distance

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Perseverance means going the distance

- Genesis 26:1-3,6,12-22

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Our culture is full of contests that require perseverance. There are athletes who strive to go the distance. Some high schoolers study long hours to gain knowledge and achieve high grades so they can get into college and win scholarships. At the time of this writing, there is a great question about who can go the distance to win the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. Looming larger still is the question of who can go the distance to win the whole presidency.

All of us are called to persevere, and most everyone knows a certain amount of drive and determination are required for even modest successes. But perseverance in the life of a Christian may have different meanings and purposes.

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While Joseph may have had his coat of many colors, Isaac, his forebear, had his wells of many frustrations. Having grown successful in the land of Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar, Isaac was envied by the Philistines. Seemingly for spite, they filled in the wells his father's servants had dug and asked Isaac to move away. "You've become too strong for us," they said.

So Isaac moved, only to have this same type of problem. His servants dug a well and found water but lost it to the herdsmen of the area who claimed it as theirs. He lost another well in a similar fashion, and it wasn't until a third well was dug that Isaac's people were able to live in peace. Isaac persevered and after this God appeared to him one night and extended the blessing of Abraham to Isaac. Isaac would prosper and flourish by God's hand.

It is possible to conclude from this text that God extended the blessing from Abraham to Isaac because Isaac persevered. The writer orders the story to give us this theological read. It is possible, however, to read the blessing's extension apart from Isaac's perseverance in digging more wells in the face of opposition, and this is probably a more theologically sound reading.

What we can say for sure is that perseverance in the face of opposition is modeled by Isaac in a meaningful way for modern readers. Consider the ways Isaac's perseverance can strengthen your students in the midst of struggles.

Isaac focused on God's clear directions to stay in Canaan rather than the

logical plan of going down to Egypt to find food in the midst of famine. God tells Isaac to stay put, and Isaac responds obediently. Likewise, believers today are able to persevere more completely when we know we are following God's path for our lives.

Further, God's direction to stay in Canaan didn't make good sense, yet Isaac stayed and prospered among Abimelech's people. We can reasonably conclude then, that God doesn't always offer up options that make sense to our human reason. There are times when we are called upon to take a risk, to make an illogical move, to go contrary to conventional wisdom. Moreover, God sometimes calls for action that will be costly in the short term but in the long run will yield a substantial harvest.

Isaac understood his directions to remain in the land of Canaan in the light of God's promise to bless him. God essentially said, "Look, I promised all this to your father Abraham, and I'm going to do the same for you. But you have to trust me." It was probably tempting for Isaac to move to Egypt where food and wealth were plentiful. But he fought his instincts because he remembered the promise of God to Abraham.

He likely remembered that promise in the context of nearly being offered to God as a living sacrifice until the angel of God stepped in (see last week's lesson, 4/13, you should revisit Genesis 22.15-18).

Ask your students to consider how palpable and powerful that promise was for the young Isaac to have heard as he crawled off the pile of wood he was nearly offered upon. By the time we get to Genesis 26, this promise of prosperity means a great deal to Isaac, and he understands the concept of obedience to the point of death—so hanging out in a famished land because God told him to would have been easier because he fully understood that God's promises were a good thing.

We can find encouragement and endurance when we focus on all the

goodness promised to us through the riches of God's son, Jesus Christ. We are enriched in our perseverance by focusing on these same ideals:

1. Focus on God's directions first. Persevere when we believe we are doing what God wants us to do.

2. Perseverance in the face of absurdity is a waste. But sometimes God calls us to unconventional obedience.

3. Perseverance is easier for us when we see it in light of all that God has promised us.

Bonus teaching aid

The Disney feature length cartoon *Hercules* contains a song about the perseverance of a teenage boy to become a real life hero. You can listen to the song "Go the Distance" for free and see the scene from the movie at this website: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lenkR5XzSJc>. This clip provides you an example of someone who is determined to persevere, but you can use it to make the point that "going the distance" in the life of a Christian calls for God's blessing and encouragement.

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