



The idea of perseverance implies difficulty. If things aren't difficult, we talk of enjoying them rather than persevering. But because of our sin and the circumstances and problems around us, we are regularly tempted to avoid, postpone, and give up on our responsibilities and disciplines. That's why Hebrews encourages us to throw off every hindrance and entanglement so that we can "run the race" and finish well.

The story of the prophet Elijah provides good examples of the kinds of hindrances and entanglements we face and how we can persevere (or not). The worst example is King Ahab. 1 Kings 16:29-34 tells us that he continues the worship of the golden calves in Bethel and Dan begun by Jeroboam to keep people from traveling to Jerusalem. He marries Jezebel of the pagan Sidonians, builds an altar and temple to Baal, and worships Asherah (queen to Baal) instead of the true God of Israel. Baal and Asherah worship is dominated by fertility rites motivated by the desire for wealth and prosperity. The problems are highlighted by Hiel of Bethel, who cares more for rebuilding Jericho than the lives of his two sons (see the warning in Josh. 6:26). Essentially, Ahab and people like Hiel give up on pleasing God and make their purposes all about themselves.

The prominent example of perseverance is the prophet Elijah. With little introduction, Elijah appears in 1 Kings 17 to announce that God is going to leave Ahab and the people destitute by taking away the rain so that they can recognize that God provides for them, not Baal, Asherah, or themselves. Then Elijah demonstrates what dependence on God looks like by hiding in the Kerith Ravine where ravens provide his food (1 Kings 17:2-6). Scripture doesn't say how long he stays by the brook, but when it dries up God sends him to a widow in Sidon, ironically Jezebel's homeland.

In Zarephath of Sidon the widow is struggling to persevere and appears hopeless. When Elijah asks for water and food, she responds that she has nothing and is preparing to finish off what little remains before she and her son die from starvation. With a small test of her faith, Elijah promises that God will provide the flour and oil they need to survive. Through the provision of food and the resuscitation of her son, she moves from talking about God as Elijah's God (1 Kings 17:12) to seeing him as The Lord who provides truth through Elijah, a man of God (17:24). Not only does she persevere, but God uses her in the process.

While God isolates Elijah for a time in the ravine, he is preparing both Elijah and the widow. Elijah becomes a light to the pagans of Sidon and the widow becomes God's means of provision to Elijah. Together they please God in their faith and dependence on him. While she may have never heard the command as such, the widow does as God directs even as she comes to know him through Elijah's perseverance.

Discussion Questions

What kinds of adversity are common in your life, and how can persevering through it shape you and enable you to please God?

How are you often tempted to avoid responsibility, procrastinate, or give up, especially as it relates to your faith in God? What helps you persevere, and what is missing when you give in to temptation?

Why are we more likely to persevere when we work on our obligations and expectations with others rather than by ourselves? How are you tempted to "go it alone" rather than in community?