

Perseverance: Pathway to Maturity

Fred Smith, Sr.

And

Brenda A. Smith

Dedicated to the faithful members of the Elliott Class of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas; to the memory of their beloved teacher Jim Smith; and to those who stood by Fred as he persevered and finished well.

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Bible passages taken from NET (New English Translation) Bible

Table of Contents

Introduction by Brenda A. Smith

Chapter 1 Back to Basics

Chapter 2 Set the Right Direction

Chapter 3 Concentrate on the Current

Chapter 4 Strengthen Your Emotional Control

Chapter 5 Overcome Enemies of Perseverance

Chapter 6 Plan for Pain

Chapter 7 Redefine Achievement

Chapter 8 Promote Spiritual Growth

Chapter 9 Rewards of Perseverance

Last Words from Fred

A Last Word from Brenda

Perseverance: Pathway to Maturity

Introduction

“I wish I could take a walk.” Those words were spoken by a bed-bound Fred Smith, Sr. without bitterness. He always said, “If you can do something about it, you have a problem; if you can’t, it’s a fact of life.” His immobility was just that – a fact of life.

During his lifetime, he touched thousands with his writing, speaking, and mentoring. His years as an executive, consultant, Christian layman influenced generations of leaders. Zig Ziglar called him “one of the wisest men I have ever known.” John Maxwell considered the book, *Learning to Lead*, one of the best on leadership.

In 1999, his failing kidneys required dialysis. His remarkable impact during incapacitation and numerous hospitalizations drew many to his conversational open houses affectionately known as “Fred in the Bed.” As his body deteriorated, and his strength diminished, his spirit increased. Perseverance was his hallmark.

Decades before, he delivered lectures on the subject to the Elliott class of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church, in Dallas, Texas. The eighties in Dallas were trying. Businesses failed and families struggled to maintain stability. Into this unsettled environment, Dad spoke a message of hope by challenging the class to persevere.

Forty years later, economic and social pressures unsettle us. His words are just as relevant and needed as we navigate choppy waters. I have chosen to leave it in the time context without updating. Executive pronouns are masculine because that was the way he spoke it, although Dad was considered a mentor by many women. He talks about communication modes which are no longer in vogue (letter writing, phone calling, for example). However, in his later years he was fascinated by the internet and kept me busy researching. He was a proponent of “the current reality.”

Fred Smith, Sr. was a man of wisdom, humor, character, and great insight. Learn, grow, and mature as you read... it would please him to be helpful.

Using the format of the Weekly Thoughts (wisdom emails available from www.breakfastwithfred.com) I have included Points to Ponder, a summary quote, and scripture verse for each chapter. A quick personal reflection on Dad’s thoughts is included at the end of each chapter.

Dad and I were a great team, and it gives me great joy to continue his work. This book is written entirely in his voice, though those who know me and my style may spy phrases and illustrations

reminiscent of my experience. There was no intention to put words into his mouth and my prayer is that he would be pleased with this work.

May you be stretched and blessed as you read. And may Jesus Christ be Praised.

Brenda A. Smith, President

BWF Project, Inc.

Breakfast With Fred Leadership Institute

www.breakfastwithfred.com www.bwfli.com

“Our time together is a pit stop, not a pep rally. Some of us are low on fuel and a little thin on rubber. Let’s retread our tires, fill our tanks, and the course again.

The composer/musician Rod McKuen wrote, “Talent is never enough in any field. It must be coupled with perseverance and recognition.” One of life’s verities is “effort varies more than talent does.” People who lose their tenacity generally lose their position in life.

The great merchant J.C. Penney believed, “Self-denial is the basic requirement for accomplishment in any field of endeavor. Success comes only to those who will follow th hard road, rather than the paths of ease and pleasure.”

The road to success is open to those who persevere.

Fred Smith, Sr.

Chapter One

Back To Basics

Trouble opens our mind; perseverance opens us to learn. Enduring isn't natural; but we can train our emotional and mental reflexes. Hanging tough can become a habit.

Tensile strength is the greatest degree of stress possible to bear without breaking apart. The critical dimension of this measurement is the point where the substance still bends, but does not deform. As we persevere, we learn where the outer limits of our emotional elasticity are drawn. Bridges have load limits and we do, too. Many times we don't know how much we can handle until we're called upon to test our strength. God knows us well and He is the ultimate structural engineer.

We must distinguish between patience and perseverance. One is passive; the other active. Certainly, there are times when we must be patient. There are times we can do nothing but survive. But perseverance involves action. My friend, All-America, All-Pro Bill Glass played 32 years of football without serious injury. He attributes this to the fact that he was always so aggressive. "The man who gets run over generally gets hurt worse than the guy who is doing the running over," he says.

Perseverance is a process, not an emotion. It is knowable, doable, and repeatable. This scientific quality takes it out of the abstract, into the concrete. Knowing the principles allows us to build a template that we can overlay onto other situations. It gives us the guts to go through and come through.

When I think of those who faithfully persevered, my friend Bufe always comes to mind. His twenty-one year old daughter was killed in an auto accident. He preached her funeral saying, "I've been preaching that this stuff works and I want to prove it." His son later died while serving as music director of their church. Bufe told a pastor in Portland, OR of his personal tragedy and God's sufficiency. The friend invited him to come preach at the evening service. 1400 came to hear him bear witness to God's faithfulness. 400 came to the altar. Bufe persevered in white hot heat.

Tough times can be relational, spiritual, physical, emotional, or financial. But the rule is the same: those who master their egos grow. Many times, ego control is the biggest part of our problem.

A business friend, removed as President of his corporation by an unfriendly merger, came to see me. He knew he would make it if he could “just get past myself,” as he put it. Wise man! We outlined a plan of action and he persevered.

Another fine example of ego control is a Dallas executive who saw his company go into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. After two years of slaving to bring it out I sat down and asked him, “Are you better for going through this?” “Yes,” he replied, “but my ego took a whale of a beating.” I looked at him across the table and said, “That may be the exact reason you are a better man.”

Business has taught me you never know if a man will pay a note until it comes due.

“Troubles come to man as sparks fly upward.” Job’s observation can be ours. Troubles are inevitable, but when they come we can count on Him. It is in the depths we see Him in action. He is good to His word... the anchor holds.

Vince Lombardi, the renowned football coach, walked into the locker room holding well-worn brown leather in his hand. “Gentlemen, this is a football.” Back to basics. As we look at perseverance, I hope these basics help you play the game:

- 1) Set the right direction
- 2) Concentrate on the current
- 3) Strengthen your emotional control
- 4) Overcome the enemies
- 5) Plan for pain
- 6) Redefine achievement
- 7) Promote spiritual growth

In the 1950s one of my well-known “Smithisms” was “There’s magic in believing if you don’t believe in magic.” Perseverance is just like that. There is no automatic answer, but there is a workable process.

The seven basic steps are not magic bullets, but they are an outline for living a life of endurance and character when things are tough.

Points to Ponder:

- 1) How do I make perseverance a hallmark of my character?
- 2) When is holding on hiding out?
- 3) What is my toughest challenge right now?
- 4) Who models endurance for me?
- 5) Why is there a difference between patience and perseverance?

Words of Wisdom: “Trouble opens our mind; perseverance opens us to learn.”

Wisdom from the Word: “And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not efficient in anything.” (James 1:4 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“Hold your breath and don’t move” is the admonition of the radiologist before the XRay. They don’t want distortion. Mostly, they don’t want to repeat the process. Too often perseverance is like that. “Tie a knot and hang on” is the cartoon caption as the character clings to a tree precipitously leaning over the cliff.

But is that true perseverance? Not at all. Perseverance is active, as Dad points out. We are engaged in the process. It is an act of the will. Growing up Smith meant adopting the life mantra: “When nothing but the will says go.” At times I wanted to exercise my “won’t,” but knew the house rules.

Perseverance is a decision we make. Paul’s letter to the Romans outlines the pathway from trials to character and hope. It is a worthy journey with maturity as the reward.

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” wrote Thomas Paine on a cold December night in 1776. Well, these are times for men and women to try for the sake of their souls. We are told scripture tells us 365 times to fear not. Those who persevere understand the tension between fear and faith – also knowing faith will ultimately triumph. As we walk through the seven steps on the pathway, I can confidently say endurance trumps trepidation; and perseverance overturns turbulence.

Chapter Two

Set the Right Direction

Perseverance in the wrong direction is as foolish as dedicated incompetence. It reminds me of the two men traveling down the road. One said, "Aren't we going in the wrong direction?" "Yes, but we are making such good time I hate to turn around," was the answer.

The right direction is essential when the path is rocky and uncertain. A lost job, a relationship that breaks apart, a child who disappoints, a disease that forever changes the way we face the future – we need a strong mind and a clear direction. They are essentials, not luxuries. But we need to accept that direction may be one measured step at a time, not a bold, continuous stride. Forward movement is the goal.

When circumstances necessitate reevaluation, it is key to re-set the goals in light of "current reality." This is one of the crucial principles of my life. I have always told our children to keep current on their facts. A map company I know uses the phrase, "Don't drive today with yesterday's map." Current thinking protects us from "might have been" living Fantasy and regret are stumbling blocks for perseverance. We endure and hold strong in what is.

In order to keep my goal setting in light of current reality, I find it helpful to make a list of my alternatives. I dismiss any fantasies, wishes, and "cudda/wudda/shudda"s. I review the list and choose the best. One of the finest decision makers I ever knew was Harry Bade, Vice President of Mobil. When I asked what he considered in the process he said, "First, I ask myself if I have a choice. If I have none, then I don't waste time trying to make a decision." It is easy to slip into the unproductive habit of thinking about alternatives that really don't exist. Persevering in the wrong direction is wasteful and foolish.

Good timing is the hallmark of a persevering attitude. When do you give up on an alternative? A couple who missed their timing held on to an unrealistic venture and lost a fortune asked me afterwards, "When do you cut loose and take your losses?" For me, I try to keep the odds with me. I cut loose when they start turning and I anticipate no reason the direction will change. Too often we hold on wishing for the best. That is not true perseverance.

Winston Churchill, is famous for his "never, never, never, never give up." Personally, I am fond of the bumper sticker philosopher who said, "When the horse is dead, dismount." My banker puts it this way: "Never delay failure with your own money."

Operating in the current reality will bring you to a crossroads. What lies ahead may not be what you anticipated. It may even bring the end of a dream and a closed door. It is important to focus on the goal. Giving up isn't the answer – actively considering the options is.

Tough situation often lead to “repotting.” Peter Drucker’s phrase succinctly describes the process of changing careers in the middle of life. I am not a gardener. Mary Alice loves to plant flowers. I noticed her moving a perfectly good plant from a perfectly good pot to a larger one. Ever curious, I asked her why she would spend the time and money to do that. “It has outgrown the old pot and needs more room for the roots to expand.” That is what my friend Peter is saying. When things are going great we hesitate to change. But when things come to a standstill, it may be the best alternative. Your roots may need some room to grow.

Before repotting, take a personal inventory. Think about your gifts, your talents, and your satisfactions. Peter talks about young people who make the mistake of being driven by their craving for a luxury car, or a status lifestyle. They graduate and head in the direction of making money the fastest. Taking a road strictly for material gain will ultimately end in dissatisfaction. Sadly, the life grabs and owns them. They hang on for dear life, heading down the wrong road at breakneck speed.

Beware of work that is profitable, but unsatisfying. Money alone is not enough. My age gives me the privilege of preaching. Life is too precious to waste. Setting the wrong direction can be costly. The price tag on choosing only comfort and convenience may prove to be much too high. Considering the end of the road is important. Those who persevere finish well by setting the right direction.

One of our favorite places is a regional arts and crafts store in Southern Pines, North Carolina. I asked the owner about his store. He told me he was a successful metallurgist in New York City. He got tired of commuting. One day he left his office and just didn't return. He traveled throughout New England, meeting craftsmen with great skills and creativity, but no commercial outlet. He opened a store and never looked back. He repotted. He assessed his direction and knew hanging on wasn't authentic perseverance – it was dying by inches. He made a decision and took action. Of course, I am not advocating walking away from responsibilities. Everyone has times of just holding on, but the direction still needs to be right.

Perseverance isn't for cowards. Packing up the personal effects in the office feels rotten; removing a wedding ring, and starting over takes courage; sitting by the bedside of a dying family member is wrenching. Very few of us arbitrarily seek out drastic life changes. For most of us, change is forced because we hesitate or postpone until there is no other choice. Genuine perseverance involves accepting the facts, analyzing the situation, outlining the alternatives, making a choice, and stepping out.

Roger Hull, former Chairman of the Board of the Mutual of New York Life Insurance Company, loved to tell stories of individuals he had to release and who then came back years later to thank him. “That was the most fortunate event in my life for it caused me to change courses and this time I got it right.”

Setting the right direction is the blessing of second chances. Setting the right direction focuses on who we are becoming, not just where we are going and how fast we are getting there.

Points to Ponder:

- 1) What would cause me to repot?
- 2) How do I know my direction is satisfying?
- 3) What measures am I using for the profitability of my goals?
- 4) How would I articulate my direction to my family, associates, friends?
- 5) What directional changes am I anticipating?

Words of Wisdom: “The right direction is essential when the path is rocky and uncertain.”

Wisdom from the Word: “You lead me in the path of life; I experience absolute joy in your presence; you always give me sheer delight.” (Psalm 16:11 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“That road parallels the highway – I bet it would be a more interesting way to get home. I wonder why I have never taken it before.” The random thought led me to a dead end outside Durango, Colorado hours later. And, yes, I had to return to the turn-off and follow the main highway to Pagosa Springs. Direction matters.

Dad taught me direction is the key to maturity and character. Goals measure the milestones, but aren’t the stepping stones. He regularly asked me, “Are you happy with who you are becoming? Are you pleased with the direction you are going?” He never asked me about my 5 year plans.

In the 1990s I was an officer and Regional Director for one of America’s largest financial services companies, living in Des Moines, IA. In 2000 I changed from corporate career to caregiving. In 2003 I accepted leadership of the Breakfast With Fred Project. Today our reach has expanded to include the Breakfast With Fred Leadership Institute. Setting and achieving specific career goals didn’t get me here, but direction did.

Serving God and developing people through creative thought and realized ideas is my direction, no matter whether it is in sales and marketing, caregiving, or non-profit leadership. Being happy with who I am becoming is a true and accurate measure. Kathleen Graham who was the

CEO of the Washington Post once said, "To love what you do, and feel that it makes a difference – how could anything be more fun?" I agree.

So, the next time I see a parallel shortcut (and I probably will), I will remind myself rabbit trails are great for the Easter bunny, but distractions for God's Easter people!

Chapter Three

Concentrate on the Current

Life has thrown you a curve and you want to pull the covers over your head. Or may you go into a manic “futuristic” exercise. The prospects of tomorrow hold much more appeal than the painful realities of today. Where does perseverance fit in?

One of the most interesting little books I repeatedly review is *A Way of Life* by Dr. William Osler. He admonishes us to live in “day-tight compartments.” This tiny volume is a talk delivered to students at Yale. He addressed them a “fellow students” to emphasize the life long search for knowledge. He told them, “When I was attending at the Montreal General Hospital and much worried as to the future, partly about the final examination, and partly as to what I should do afterwards, I picked up a volume of Carlyle and saw ‘Our business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what is clearly at hand.’ It was the starting point of a habit that has enabled me to utilize to the full the simple talent entrusted to me.” Osler showed me that today is the only day.

I have talked with you about keeping current. Staying in the present isn’t easy. Clearly, it seems better suited to some personalities and temperaments than others. But as we face difficulties, it becomes a necessary discipline to develop. We laugh with our children and grandchildren about eating an elephant one bite at a time. Overcoming and persevering are no less than dining on elephant. I have actually never done that, but in my day as a chicken eating contest winner, I got the hang of hanging on!

The Bible backs up the idea of day-tight living. We are told to pray for our daily bread. The workers were hired to go into the vineyard for the day. And we are told “boast not yourself of tomorrow, for you know not what tomorrow may bring.” The best way to appreciate today is to live appropriately within each compartment.

I am reminded of the pastoral painting of the peasants planting their field. Underneath are the Latin words for act and hope. We are to do our work today, not being anxious for tomorrow. Keep in mind their act of sowing was done in the hope of reaping. Brenda tells me her friends and associates in sales know the calls they make today has the strong possibility of creating business in four months. They act and hope.

General Robert E. Lee wrote to his son Custis “Fix your mind upon what is before you... live in the world you inhabit... look upon things as they are... take them as you find them.”

One of the traps of moving out of day-tight compartment is moving in the wishing mindset. The man and woman who planted had hope because they had planted. More lottery tickets are sold in downturns than during bull markets. A local financial planner told me casino stocks traditionally see upticks during bear markets. People are depending on the wish ethic, not the work ethic.

Let's be clear about this: staying in the immediate does not eliminate the place of genuine future strategic thinking. Part of today's work is planning for tomorrow. The couple in serious debt resulting from unwise decisions must do some heavy planning. The couple expecting twins must prudently provide for the future. But planning isn't an end unto itself. Planning should always be a preface for action. If we execute daily, then the goal will be more easily met. Living this way is not particularly dramatic, but it takes perseverance and guts to do the non-dramatic.

Dr. Osler reminded the students: "Waste of energy, mental distress, and nervous worries dog the steps of a man who is anxious about the future. Cultivate the habit of living in day-tight compartments knowing that successful daily living starts early." He recommended three or four hours daily each day "making a silent conquest of your mental machinery." The greatest challenge any of us faces is the maximizing of himself. Distraction and breaks in concentration weaken our effectiveness. The habit of mental discipline is a must. The book of Proverbs calls is "controlling the spirit."

Perseverance allows us to identify what is real, not just imagined. It strengthens us to make accurate assessments and deal with the current reality.

Learning to live in day-tight compartments requires "forgetting the things that are behind and pressing forward." Have you ever spent time with someone who is in a tough place? The litany of "might have beens" is tiresome. It is tempting to think of the deals that didn't make, the course grade that could have been higher, or the relationship that crashed on the rocks. Some people are constantly wondering if they took the right path. For example, I recently talked with a man hair obviously longer than his peers. He wanted me to notice. In commenting on it he said, "I am going to make up for some of my youth that I missed." If he only knew how childish he looked!

Those who successfully persevere live right where they are, and put the past right where it is – in the past.

Why do we assume an alternative would be better? That isn't necessarily true. Think of those who would have taken the Titanic if they had been wealthy enough. In Cincinnati I was at the airline counter while a man raged at the ticket agent about missing a plane which was just

taxiing away. He demanded they pull the plane back to get him. Fifteen minutes after takeoff, the plane crashed. He no longer complained.

The Apostle Paul said he died daily which means each morning he could experience resurrection in the new day. We are not strong enough to carry yesterday, tomorrow, and still do well today. A friend told me the story of being caught in the “analysis paralysis” of prioritizing his life. He called and asked my advice. He was shocked to hear my response: “Answer your mail.” Nothing especially profound, but tremendously effective. I was telling him to get moving today, without focusing on tomorrow. Procrastination put a dead-bolt lock on his ability to act.

Thinking of life in 24 hour segments promotes our concentration and confidence. Lacking these qualities makes us move in quick jerks. We all know the famous story of Andrew Carnegie and the consultant he hired to increase productivity. The consultant came back after an appropriate time with: “make a list of what needs to be done and do the first thing until the list is finished.” Carnegie paid him \$25,000 which is about \$500,000 in today’s dollars. Not a bad consulting fee.

Productive perseverance is achieved by building the habit of concentrating on the current. When dreaming becomes daydreaming, and planning becomes escapism, it is impossible to navigate troubled waters. When we discipline our mind and spirits to live one day at a time, we do what is before us, preparing the ground for the next day. I once heard a man pray: “Oh, Lord, give me the strength to do just what you have put ahead of me, but not get ahead of you.” Amen to that.

Points to Ponder:

- 1) What changes would I have to make to live in “day-tight compartments?”
- 2) Where is the balance between yesterday, today, and tomorrow?
- 3) How does my faith impact the way I look at the future?
- 4) Where does wishing distract me?
- 5) What do I need to put behind me in order to move forward?

Words of Wisdom: “Thinking of life in 24 hour segments promotes our concentration and confidence.”

Wisdom from the Word: “What I am commanding you today is to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to obey His commandments, His statutes, and His ordinances.”
(Deuteronomy 30:15 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“Brenda, would you pray for me? I know this is just what life is going to be, but I can’t seem to find time for everything. I am so tired.”

Her comment in the church hallway made me stop momentarily and reflect on the “question behind the question” as we used to say in business. Did she really want prayer to squeeze more and more activity into less and less time? Surely not. Perhaps she hoped for an older woman to say, “Stop! This isn’t what life is about.”

What did I say to my young friend? Not enough that day, but it certainly gave me impetus to talk to myself. God doesn’t call us to a rat race, but to a race of faith. His strength is enough for His purposes. Living in day-tight compartments doesn’t mean forcing ourselves into a box of obligations, expectations, and activities that are beyond reasonable limits.

Let the world run amuck. We are to run at His pace, seeing Him day by day, trusting Him hour by hour, and walking in His light minute by minute. The hymnist puts it well, “Day by day and with each passing moment, strength I find to meet my trials here...Every day the Lord Himself is with me with a special mercy for each hour.”

Chapter Four

Strengthen Your Emotional Control

Every multi-millionaire I know has suffered failure. Mike Todd, the movie mogul, was one asked if he had ever been poor. “No, but I have been broke two or three times.” Broke was a temporary financial condition; poor was a mental condition. Most of America’s poverty cannot be solved by throwing money at it. We are distressed by poverty of the spirit, not just the pocketbook.

Financial reversals often impact self-image and the desire to accomplish. In reflecting on my upbringing, the thought struck me – we didn’t know we were as impoverished as we were. Our family focused on the art of living, not the standard of living.

The American economy has been hurting and these are troubled times for many. Upheavals of any variety are better handled by strengthening our emotional control. Please understand me. Emotional control as an element of perseverance is not teeth gritting and rope clenching. This is about creating a process. Here are some principles I find helpful:

1) Stretch your emotional wheelbase:

The difference between a child and an adult is the quick oscillation between the emotions. Children can go from crying to laughing in a moment. When you give them what they want, they smile. Withhold their pleasure and the storm clouds suddenly form. The Texas climate is described by this phrase, “Don’t like the weather? Well, just wait a minute.” Some people’s emotions are just that volatile.

When you think about this concept consider the wheelbase of cars. For example, hitting a bump in a Volkswagen is a lot than in a Cadillac. The length of the wheelbase makes the difference. The length of time between the bump on the front and the back cushions the impact in the Cadillac. In the Volkswagen you take the bump almost simultaneously.

Just like that, we need to stretch the effect of events that change our moods. Maturing means managing life’s speed bumps with discipline and control.

Dr. Richard Swenson writes in his book *Margin*, that stress depletes our emotional reserves. He contends too many of us are riding in the red zone with our emotional thermometers registering “overheated.”

Stretching our wheelbase gives us an edge in rough times preventing us from going over the edge.

2) Never panic

Since childhood I have been interested in automobile racing. I am fascinated by the driver's ability to hit the wall and yet steer his car through the traffic into the infield. He doesn't quit unless he is unconscious. He fights to minimize the loss and avoid deadly pileups. Panic means giving in to the circumstances and giving up all control. The racer's rule: keep as much control as possible.

We handle the urge to panic differently. Some are hysterical and explode like a Roman candle, going all to pieces with their hands in the air, mouths wide open, and eyes tightly shut. Others deny loss and assume the ostrich position. The downside of this stance is those who put their heads in the sand leave an awful lot of backside exposed. And people love to kick it. Fatalists placidly surrender to the circumstances like my friend who was convinced plane crashes came in threes. When one would go down, he would wait for the next two before flying again. He created a fatalistic formula that controlled his life.

May I give you a word or two more on fatalism? Sadly, there are those who believe you can't get comfortable with good things because bad quickly follows. They see life as a set of scales which balance between triumph and tragedy. The illogical extension of this thinking is the warped view that God is poised in vindictive mode, waiting for the scales to tip to the "gotcha" side. An example of this is my good friend Phillip Yancey's story in *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

He relates he grew up thinking God had a permanent scowl. It was only when he realized God smiled that his life dramatically changed. A new friend, president of a large organization, asked me if I thought God would take away his money. "Why would you ask that question?" "I quit going to church and my family says God is going to get me." He is in an emotional panic, waiting for the heavy hand of God to land on him. That isn't the way I read Scripture.

All these postures are immature and emotionally weak positions. In panicking, they are giving up control. You may have hit a wall, but keep control and stay conscious. Do minimal damage and persevere.

3) Maintain a Positive Attitude

Some people say perseverance is what you do while you wait for the hearse. Others say it is what you do while waiting for the bandwagon. I am a realist – I am not a sugary sweet Pollyanna. If you doubt this, just ask my family or some of the negotiators on the other side of the table from me.

I have no mental category for escapism. But, I do know I can choose between positive and negative thoughts and behaviors. The great reformer Martin Luther was known to battle depression. One morning his wife came down dressed in black, wearing a mourner's veil. Her surprised husband asked, "Who is dead?" She somberly replied, "God – from the way you are acting." Martin Luther taught us about grace; his wife instructed us in gratitude.

Fears immobilize. Do you let fear destroy your dreams? Protect yourself from negative internal conversations. Faith is the answer. Faith in action is the antidote to "stinkin' thinkin'" as my dear friend Zig Ziglar calls it. Slipping into negative thinking quickly propels us into negative behavior. We have a choice of our attitude and perseverance is promoted by positivity.

4) Avoid Bitterness and Revenge

The little black book vindictive people use for the "get even with" list is a poison package. Scripture tells us, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord." The mature life has no room for revenge. It is an acid that eats away at the inner being. Unfortunately, some of us form around a hurtful incident until it becomes the core of life. The oyster takes the irritating sand and creates a pearl. The vengeful build an ugly, deformed knot. They become mean spirited, cynical, unhealthy, desperate, joyless, and certainly unpleasant to be around.

I know it is difficult to avoid bitterness when hurt. I have certainly experienced some deep wounds. But a friend in Wichita, Kansas, gave me an example of overcoming that constantly reminds me to let the pain go. After speaking for a prayer breakfast in Kansas, one of the executives asked me to go out and visit his plant. He employed 200 mentally challenged workers. I must admit the early morning speaking engagement was getting to me and I wanted to decline his invitation, but he persisted. Most of the employees were born with a form of Downes Syndrome. As we went through the facility, I asked him how often he came to the factory floor. "Almost every day, Fred." We went along and he stopped regularly to speak and hug. We went to the gym and met the physical education supervisor. A young employee came up to him and warmly

embraced him. “Fred, this is our daughter.” I hugged her and realized my friend had chosen to become better, not bitter.

Stretch your wheelbase, never panic, maintain a positive attitude, and avoid bitterness – you will strengthen your emotional control. Race car drivers who survive master control – do it and you will win your race.

Points to Ponder:

- 1) How long is my emotional wheelbase?
- 2) What strategies do I use to avoid panic?
- 3) Who is the strongest influence in my life?
- 4) Where is the poison of bitterness hurting me?
- 5) Why does bitter sometimes win over better?

Words of Wisdom: “We are distressed by poverty of the spirit, not the pocketbook.”

Wisdom from the Word: “For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power, and love, and self-control.” (2 Timothy 1:7 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“Jack, SYEW.” I looked quizzically at my son as he spoke to his toddler son. “We are teaching to stretch his emotional wheelbase. Grandfather would be proud.” When I was in elementary school our report cards gave academic marks and grades for “self-control.” Loving to talk repeatedly resulted in red S- entries in the self-control column. My teachers enjoyed my scholastic abilities, but chafed at my chattiness. Thankfully, I matured, stretched my emotional wheelbase and learned when and when not to talk.

Dad and I shared a love of driving. He longed to race; I simply love the life of a road warrior, putting thousands of miles on my car year by year. As a young driver, Dad gave me the wheel in the mountains of North Carolina. When I rode the brake on the curves I rode his nerves. He finally said, “These curves are designed and engineered to be taken at the marked speed. You are a danger to others by crawling.” Panic is counterproductive.

Thirty years ago I traveled a bumpy personal road. I received a letter from Dad with a cryptic message: “Brenda, Proverbs 16:32.” Hurrying to decode his note I read, “Better to be slow to anger than to be a mighty warrior. And one who controls his temper is better than one who

captures a city.” I got it. Successfully maneuvering the mine fields of this path requires the wheelbase of an 18 wheeler, not a Smart car.

Chapter Five

Overcome the Enemies

Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan tells the story of Christian and his trek to the Celestial City. Along the way are the City of Delight and the Valley of Despair. He starts on his way determined to persevere, but the enemies actively pursue him. Successful perseverance comes by overcoming the enemies cleverly disguised and customized to fit each traveler and each situation.

Many of our obstacles may be external, but the most serious are generally internal. When I was a director of the S. H. Kress Company, I visited the stores and asked the manager about the major problems. If he described them as externally driven, I doubted his managerial capabilities. If he discussed the internal problems, I knew we had a manager with potential for progress. This manager defined situations he could do something about. Certainly there were external threats, but most were out of his control.

Each step of the perseverance process comes back to building good mental disciplines. Fighting the enemies of endurance requires good habits. Start with a reflex then train it into a habit. Habits are our friends.

1) Hostile transference

A couple came to see me saying, "We have a problem." As I listened, it became clear she had nothing to do with the creation of the problem. Yet, she maturely accepted ownership as half of the marriage partnership. She could have easily said (and I have heard it many times) "this stupid husband of mine, much against my advice, lost our money." But she didn't. And, eventually they worked together to find an answer. She knew resolution, not recrimination, was the road to solution.

How easy it is in rough time to point fingers and shift blame. From childhood we learn to respond like a quick draw sharpshooter. "It's not my fault." Our third grandchild is a boy named Jeff. He was born behind two strong-willed sisters. One day when he was still a preschooler Brenda heard him mumbling to himself. She got close enough to hear, "Not my fault, not my fault, not my fault." Jeff, what did you do?" "Nothing – I'm just practicing for when Heather and Meredith blame me."

2) Depression is a strong opponent

Research shows a young man today is ten times more likely to be depressed as his father, and twenty times more than his grandfather. A great deal of this results from the artificial

measures we put on life. Our faulty, “have it all” definition of success creates an atmosphere ripe for depression. The generation of materialism is degenerating.

The greatest defense against depression is gratitude – or so I have found. I constantly work to focus on the things I have, not on the things I don’t.

Recently, a friend told me he stayed home rather than fight the inclement weather. This meant he didn’t get his gym time. So, he stretched out on the floor and did his exercises. Only then did he realize what beautiful ceilings were in their house. He could have been out of sorts for missing his scheduled workout, but he let gratitude win.

There are certainly clinical reasons for depression that require medical attention. But oftentimes, the dark times close in on us and we get tunnel vision. A therapist told me grateful people are generally generous. One of the cures for non-clinical depression is getting outside of ourselves and giving to others. Gratitude can be the shield against the fiery darts of despair.

3). Unhealthy Ego Demands

I am not talking about ego versus non-ego. The issue is healthy ego versus unhealthy. Where are we deriving our ego satisfaction? Do we seek gratification from others or practice dedication to the betterment of others? Loss often detaches us from our healthy ego and makes us feel rootless. The challenge is to find a healthy alternative. In tough times, we quickly identify our ego center. Our child is involved in illegal activities, our spouse is jailed for fraudulent business practices, or a friend betrays us – we are quickly moved to find the foundation of our true identify. When this happens we are tempted to replace the displaced self-worth through inappropriate and improper means. We rush to fill the vacuum and find nothing but a giant sucking noise. Persevering requires building on the Rock, not the sands of unhealthy ego expectations.

4) Boredom

The addiction of activity affects us all. When the pace slows down. We feel we are dying. Speed and noise are our pep pills. Some get caught in the web of the adrenaline rush, losing the ability to recognize authentic energy. They go for the hype – whether in religion, business, or social life. They find the constant, even plodding, rhythm of perseverance extremely difficult. We value the fast lane, the type A, jet-setting lifestyle, while struggling with inactivity. Boredom, to me, comes from having an entirely erroneous view of “the good life.”

There are so many interesting things to do, to think about, to talk about, to read about. There are more interesting people to meet and place to go than I will ever experience.

Unfortunately, some fold their roadmaps for life in all the wrong places because they are looking for the shortcut and fail to enjoy the journey.

The first section of my great “undiscovered classic,” *You and Your Network* is titled Joy for the Journey. Boredom is a thief, stealing our joy and impoverishing our spirits. It is an arrogant and presumptuous attitude, not given to perseverance.

5) Superstition

Have you ever met anyone who thought the good and bad in their lives was a direct result of their present relationship with God? This is superstition, not spirituality. They have a misunderstanding of grace and works. It is God who saves and sustains. We cannot jump high enough to impress God. Many times immature believers think they control the outcomes of their lives by being “God’s pets.” They are surprised to find He doesn’t raise spoiled brats. They claim during good times God is blessing them and during bad times they are being disciplined. This is much more superstition than faith. Often they take the next illogical, unbiblical step and believe an abundance of good works will break the chain of bad. This is not what Scripture teaches. The laws of life apply to us all. The rain still falls on the just and the unjust. When we attribute our situations to God’s favor or disfavor, we view the solutions unrealistically.

A.C. Greene demonstrates his view of persevering against the odds when he says, “there are a lot of people who know what they should do in life, but don’t possess the inner power, the courage, and the guts to do it. I don’t want to be one of those people. My faith helps me keep things in perspective when things are going good, and stabilizes me when things are going bad.” He takes his faith as seriously as his basketball, and he knows that neither one depends on superstition.

Following the system built on principles of perseverance helps us make it through. It is a process of running the gauntlet of doubt, depression, and disappointment. The battle-tested soldier is infinitely stronger than the raw recruit. One has experience, the other theory. Oswald Chambers points out we are strengthened as we endure – it is in the battle we grow. “We are not given strength TO overcome, but we are given strength AS we overcome.” The enemies of perseverance will never voluntarily retreat, but we can develop both defensive and offensive strategies to drive them back and claim victory.

Points to Ponder

- 1) Which enemy competes against my perseverance?
- 2) How do I deal with depression?

- 3) What keeps my ego in the healthy range?
- 4) When am I the most grateful?
- 5) How do I protect myself from superstitious thinking?

Words of Wisdom: “The enemies of perseverance will never voluntarily retreat, but we can develop both defensive and offensive strategies to drive them back and claim victory.”

Wisdom from the Word: “My enemies, do not gloat over me! Though I have fallen, I will get up. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.” (Micah 7:8 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“Remember who you are, where you are from, and what you represent.” As young children we were regularly sent out to face the world with this parental admonition from Mom and Dad. I distinctly remember the words, and also remember wondering about the answer to the who, where, and what. I grew up recognizing a solid understanding of who God is and who I am is key to overcoming the enemies of my soul.

My brother once asked Dad, “If you had just one more talk to give, what would be your subject?” Dad didn’t hesitate in his response ... “The nature of man and the nature of God.” He felt this was the seminal discussion for all worldviews. Without proper understanding of both, we are subject to flawed logic and expectations. We are target for the enemies of perseverance.

I once sat in a meeting listening to bright people discuss the eco-system and its business implications. I wrote on my pad, “We really need to be discussing the ego-system and the implications on our organization.” Our emotional environment is certainly threatened by antagonistic forces as much as our air and water.

Enemies of perseverance are dogged, but they are also dog-tired. Once we see them for what they are, where they come from, and what they represent we have the power to overtake and overcome. When we endure with eyes wide open, we can see the victory.

Chapter Six

Plan for Pain

Bob Richards, former Olympic gold medalist, and I lectured together. I listened in as he interviewed other Olympians. He asked, “What do you do when you hurt?” Each one of them had a specific routine for the hurting times. I was curious and asked him later, “Why did you ask that?” Quickly he replied, “No one wins the gold without hurting.” They expected it and planned for it. It was part of the perseverance plan on the road to the victory stand.

Marathoners anticipate hitting the wall. A business associate began running marathons in his 50th year. His first one was at White Rock Lake in Dallas. The participants call it “Running the Rock and know exactly where they will experience the great depletion of mental and physical energy. As he ran it year after year, he knew the mile marker and trained to break through it.

Brenda entertained her then five year old grandson Andrew in a play area. She watched him try over and over to climb atop the tree-like molded plastic form. He slipped, fell, and bruised his knees, but kept going after it. She decided he had tried enough and suggested he play somewhere else. He looked her square in the eye as he hung a few feet from the top and said, “Gram, do you know what a champion is? Until I get to the top I won’t be a champion. It doesn’t matter about my knees.” He knew the pain of perseverance – and the cost of championship.

My friend, Robert Schuller, frequently said on his worldwide television broadcast, “No pain – no gain.” That’s true. Without genuine perseverance there can be pain with no gain. I am interested in your gain, and I want you to plan for pain.

Successful executives structure their lives in such a way there are as few surprises as possible. Building an internal infrastructure to prevent emotional surprises is a key element of perseverance. Can we know what to expect? Of course not completely, but we can certainly know that difficult times will produce pain. Preparation will strengthen our resolve to sustain. It will also short circuit our desire to use avoidance techniques. Going and growing through the pain produces maturity – running away doesn’t.

Artificial relief and quick fixes tempt us, especially in extended periods. I have seen men and women turn to alcohol, drugs, sex, or spending to dull the pain. Short term solutions like these invariably lead to long term problems.

In my experience, one of the primary causes of pain is loss. Here are two examples:

1) Confidence

An officer of a failed corporation sat at breakfast and told me he was a phony. “I didn’t have the capability everyone credited to me.” I stopped him saying, “I wouldn’t sit and listen to anyone else lie about you, so I won’t let you do it, either.” That is exactly what he was doing. He lost his confidence, but not his ability. I have a sign in my office to remind me: “You haven’t failed – only your plans have.”

Having an objective view of the experience allows us to accurately assess our situation. In doing this we operate from the current reality, permitting us to make solid judgments. A totally subjective approach results in withdrawal, or the cockiness of false confidence.

2) Relationships

The loss of relationships based on position, not personal attributes is common. Our society values success. Unfortunately, the loss of title results many times in the loss of relationships and power we thought were attributed to us personally. We face the cold reality that the power stayed on the desk as we closed the door. I have always said the most vulnerable position is VP of Purchasing. Too many operate under the false assumption ballgame tickets, the special remembrances, and the friendships come because others liked him, not just because of the orders placed with vendors. It isn’t about who they are, but what they do – and what they can do for others.

One of my friends retired from a top management job with a Fortune 500 corporation. Shortly before, he called to ask what he should expect. “They won’t return your calls like they did” was my simple answer. He didn’t believe me. Several months later he called to say, “You were right. Now I don’t even leave my number.”

This loss occurs in personal relationships, as well. Divorced women experience the separation from social networks, and church groups existing in the couples’ world. The privileges of being Mrs. So and So disappear with the dissolution of the marriage. Tragically, this alienation occurs way too often in the Christian community, ostracizing them as they would someone with a communicable disease.

The question then arises: How can you persevere through professional and personal loss?

1) Build new support systems

Unless we can recognize the difference between associates and genuine friends we will be disappointed and hardened. One man going through a serious financial down time

wisely listed his friends who would not be affected by his financial failures. He and his wife concentrated on spending their time with those on their “authentic” list.

However, we should not be disillusioned by the remoteness of acquaintances. Realistic living means accepting the current reality and making decisions on the what is, not the “wish it was.” And maturity is defined by right thinking which doesn’t devolve into cynicism.

2) Stay in the Loop

Keep up contacts and activities even when enduring difficult times. You might have to alter some of your hobbies because you don’t have the discretionary income for golf, or the expense account for pricey lunches. But you can creatively stay in touch. I find writing letters, sending clippings, making phone calls, and looking for opportunities keep my mind active and the energy up.

3) Turn an Experience into an Experiment

Tough times call for objective thinking. Establish an experimental mindset and you can negotiate the experience without focusing on the pain alone. For example, I took a stop watch to the dentist to measure exactly how long it hurt. Without the stop watch I would have probably told you I hurt 50% of the time. Actually, by running the watch only when I actually hurt, I found it was a mere four seconds. When I planned for pain, I recognized the anticipation was far greater than the actual experience.

Let me share a funny experience turned into an experiment. Years ago, I consulted with a prominent West Coast memorial garden. In those days, the salesmen went door to door with their sales materials. Their biggest problem was door slamming. I used this technique to their advantage. We gave the salesmen a chart of various door slammer types. For example, there were quick, loud, apologetic, indifferent, offensive, polite, indignant, etc. When the door rudely closed they checked the appropriate box and moved next door. Closed doors can be open doors for mental and emotional strength. By turning their experiences into an experiment they moved from subjective to objective; from personal rejection to business detection. The morale of the sales force increased as did retention.

4) Get Over Yourself

The mental energy needed to make our way through the pain of trials can be diverted into self-absorption, sucking us into a tight downward spiral. The whirlpool’s negative energy makes escape difficult. I know a kindly 84 year old woman who still writes

twenty letters a day to prisoners. The pain of aging and degeneration of poor health is set aside as she ministers to the incarcerated. She is redeeming the time and the pain. She has no time for pity parties.

Plan for pain – it will come. Don't be surprised and thrown off course. James tells us, "Don't be surprised when various trials come." A well-conceived plan makes us ready for action. Perseverance is not a haphazard response – it is the reward of mental, emotional, and spiritual discipline.

Points to Ponder

- 1) When has my confidence taken a hit?
- 2) How do I deal with loss?
- 3) What is the foundation for my self-worth?
- 4) How do I face problems objectively?
- 5) Why is it hard to plan for pain?

Words of Wisdom: "Building an internal infrastructure to prevent emotional surprises is a key element of perseverance."

Wisdom from the Word: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist anymore...or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist."
(Revelation 21:3 NET Bible)

Brenda's Perspective

"Why did you quit running?" My friend's response was sadly succinct: "it hurts and I didn't like pain." Unfortunately, too many of us start running – running away – when the pain begins.

Recently, I turned a corner and came face to face with someone who had inflicted great injury. Oh, how I wanted to run. The gain following pain was of little interest to me at that moment. But even years later after my Dad's death, his words still strengthen me..."those that persevere recognize the inevitability of pain and accept its presence as part of the process." In other words, "don't be surprised – just be prepared." So, I turned an experience into an experiment and faced the situation with a smile (or at least a half smile). Amazing how good growth can feel, especially when it comes through pain.

Even though we should be prepared for pain, we don't need to be singularly focused on it. The admonition of James wisely tells us to live with the reality of pain, but he doesn't tell us to obsess and worry, does he? If our goal is maturity, then our strategy for living should provide for pain but also understand the end is coming through, not wallowing in it.

Chapter Seven

Redefine Achievement

A noted organizational development expert recommends to his clients they segment their lives into business units. He tells them to see themselves as CEO with each area a corporate division. In this model, they have direct reports for the physical, financial, spiritual, relational, career, and intellectual division of their company. Quarterly reports are required. It is great if all divisions are profitable, but when they aren't, strategic plans are developed to ensure a healthy bottom line. For example, when a report is submitted showing a 10 pound "overage," they physical division is running in the red. A plan for weight control is immediately put into place. The other divisions with positive results get the "attaboys."

Another way to say this: during times when we have no great successes in our career, it is important to have accomplishments in other areas of our lives. I call this reattaching our egos. During rough, dark times, our egos take a beating. I mentioned it is crucial to control our egos in these seasons. Part of that process is maintaining a balanced view of ourselves. A loss in one area does not permit us to do an across the board declaration of failure. A specific loss needs to be overcome by redefining achievement and finding success in another area.

A friend in career transition called for ideas. I talked with him about finding personal satisfaction in other areas of his life. When we met again several months later, he was forty pounds lighter and much more relaxed. "I took your suggestion and focused on athletics. I not only lost weight, but now I am the doubles champion at the tennis club." He redefined achievement.

Often we ignore possible areas of highest return. A profitability assessment of our "corporation" is helpful to focus us. The fine line we walk is maintaining a healthy ego by shifting our accomplishment without dropping into escapism. A steady flow of productivity is the goal.

Have you ever pruned a tree? I am not speaking from experience here, but I have friends who talk to me about such things. When a branch is removed, the tree doesn't die. It transfers its growth energy in another direction. Are you suffering through a painful time because you recently retired and miss the corporate environment? Has the graduation of your youngest child created an empty nest? Or has a physical incapacity robbed you of the sport you love? You are not at the end. The juices can be redirected and you will produce fruit.

An extremely bright high achiever came to me with a dilemma. Though successful, he was hollow in some areas...he had some soft spots. As we talked, he decided to make significant

adjustments. He did and his life changed dramatically. In a later conversation he remarked that I helped him revector his life. Think of two divergent lines. The slightest variance results in an exponential shift in the trajectory.

One degree becomes an insurmountable distance as the lines move through time and space. Life decision, seemingly innocuous and meaningless, can have unforeseen dimensions.

Aging is a prime example of redefining achievement. Erik Erikson, the prominent 20th century psychologist and psychoanalyst, created the phrase “identity crisis.” His work centered on the wholeness of the human being. His remarks about aging have been most helpful to me. He remarked that as we grow older, we move the deterioration to the periphery. In other words, the core of who we are never changes. The things we can no longer do are moved to the outside of our life and don’t define us. The loss of mobility, agility, ability, and responsibility are tough. No one wants to be dependent. But redefining achievement gives us strength to persevere.

So many of my friends are card-carrying members of the “used-to-club.” I used to do this – I used to do that. So what? I tell people I am a true has-been because in my day “I has been.” But the healthy response is moving the deterioration to the outside, leaving my center alive and active. I like to say service is the rent I pay for occupying space on earth. As I age, I find alternative ways to experience achievement and to provide the services that my rent requires. Perseverance in the aging process protects us against fatal ego hits.

Years ago success meant “a name on the door and a Bigelow on the floor.” Life prompts us to redefine. A corporate title, a tenured position, a 30 year marriage, a one artist gallery show – all these demonstrate achievement. But they don’t define who we are. If they disappear, we can persevere; readjust our channel for achievement and emerging productive and satisfied. Identify other strength and come through stronger. You are a gem with many facets – let them all shine.

Points to Ponder

- 1) When have I redefined achievement?
- 2) How am I doing as CEO of my own organization?
- 3) Where are my hollow spots?
- 4) What preparation am I making for the next age and stage?
- 5) Who is part of my life-planning process?

Words of Wisdom: “During times when we have no great successes in our career, it is important to have accomplishments in other areas of our lives.”

Wisdom from the Word: “Look, you have instructed many; you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled, and you have strengthened the knees that gave way.” (Job 4:3, 4 NET Bible)

Brenda’s Perspective

“I am CEO of my own company with 8 divisions.” That was my opening line at the 35th reunion of my high school class. Graduates from my school lead major companies, live in old-money houses, and enjoy country club lifestyles. Even with a career I loved, a most interesting living experience (a 75 year old hotel in downtown Des Moines, IA), three grown children, grandchildren, and a growing faith, I struggled to face my classmates as a divorced single woman. The “most likely to succeed” banner didn’t quite fit because unlike most of my classmates, my marriage failed. So I thought about the “CEO of yourself” concept and wrapped myself in it as I walked into the room.

In 2000 I exchanged my career for a life of caregiving. Mom and Dad moved into my house and my goal of senior management morphed into seniors’ management. I repotted, and redefined achievement, but not without a struggle. Going into business situations without a card showing who I was by what I did left me emotionally dangling. For a while, I carried cards with my professional designations and the title, “Sabbaticalist.” Looking back, I see how silly that was, but it was a step in ego adjustment. I was saying to myself and to others, “I haven’t left the career – I have just pushed the pause button.” God had other plans, for my 3 or 4 month sabbatical turned into a permanent revectoring.

Eventually, the new pot felt comfortable and the roots grew. I gladly accepted the job of helping Dad move his deterioration to the periphery. I engaged with Mom as she struggled with her inability to be helpful, as she could no longer cook and nurture the family. The loss of independence through Parkinson’s hurt. She loved us to her last day, blessing us with her presence even through the debilitation. Dad in typical fashion redefined it by saying, “I am not handicapped – I am delightfully dependent.” His body weakened, but his mind and spirit expanded exponentially. It was a journey toward finishing well. He affectionately called me his cruise director – a role of honor.

Chapter Eight

Promote Spiritual Growth

Several years ago, a friend of mine was in deep financial trouble. Bankruptcy was a distinct possibility. He asked his pastor to pray for him. Before the pastor began, he said “I will pray if you will promise me you won’t be mad at God, even if you declare bankruptcy.” My friend agreed and repeatedly said he believes this was the first step in his spiritual growth.

Not only should we avoid getting mad at God in adverse times, but we should avoid the “spoiled brat” syndrome, expecting God to break the rules, making exceptions just for us. “Why me? I’ve been a good Christian. I don’t drink, smoke, or chase women.” This high profile executive showed up at all the Christian events, but had a most immature view of himself and God. The proper definition is grounded in who we are in Christ, not what we do or don’t do.

Too many Christians want God to put them in a holy bubble, protecting them from life’s problems. A more mature attitude is, “Why not me?” The Marines expect and want the toughest jobs in the service. The old Catholic mystics viewed spiritual growth as the benefit of tough assignments.

In troubling times, it is important to develop the right image of God. We tend to draw our own imagery based on what we need Him to look like. A clear understanding of God in the Bible keeps our head straight. While lecturing at a conservative seminary a student approached me and said, “God has me just where He wants me to be.” “Where is that,” I asked. “Broke” was his quick reply. Believing his image of God was faulty and wanting to be helpful, I answered him. “We have a son and if I felt he was saying I had him just where I wanted him and that was broke, I would be deeply disappointed in myself and who I was as a father.”

Don’t blame God for the consequences of your own irresponsibility.

God loves us. We persevere because we know His presence and rest in His relationship. Ray Stedman, the venerable teacher and pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, told me his life turned around when he found out “God is for me.” Not only our image of God, but our concept of how He works affects our spiritual growth.

I was the weekend speaker at a singles’ retreat. A young man wanted to have breakfast and talk. He told me how much it meant to find freedom in Christ, knowing God had a plan for His life. The turning point was realizing the purpose isn’t dependent on our behavior. Before that, every time his business experienced a downturn, he examined his life to find the sin.

What is God's good isn't always translated into what we say is good. He has a purpose for us – to be transformed into the image of His own dear Son, Jesus. He uses the ups and downs to conform us.

Learning to appreciate God's silence is part of our spiritual growth. The quiet comes in some of the hardest places – the places we want Him to shout out to us. We wait and wait, as David the Psalmist said. Then He answers. God's delays are not God's denials. We are to be patient. True faith does not require sight or sound. In these quiet times, we know it is our faith that pleases Him. Oswald Chambers, my most revered theologian says, "God honors us with His silence."

Phillip Yancey's *Disappointment with God* is one of the most thoughtful books in my library. He wrote it after an experience with a young man angry at God for not responding in the way he wanted. This man, a theological student, in total frustration, got up from his knees at 4AM and went out to the barbeque pit. There he burned his Bible, his notebooks, and walked away from his faith. God didn't answer and he was mad. Phillip puts a voice to the question people are afraid to ask: "Is the Father listening to me? Can He be trusted? Does He even exist?"

I am convinced God is not afraid of these questions. Too many Christians think their assignment is to protect Him. His integrity is worthy and equal to every challenge. The deep-rooted answers come through struggle. God's goal for us is to grow to look like Jesus. He is serious about our growth, so we shouldn't be surprised at the process.

Downturns in our lives can result from outside forces like a corporate reorganization. They can, also, be the outcome of bad decisions we make in our daily dealings with family or friends. Perseverance requires the accurate understanding of the difference between sin and mistake. If it is a mistake, we correct it; if it is sin, we confess it.

For example, unethical behavior in business is often greed-based. I consider greed a sin, not a mistake. The man or woman who builds a business in the wrong location makes a strategic mistake, but isn't committing a sin. I once knew a man whose dream was owning a donut shop. After less than a year he closed the doors. Why? He put the store on the side going out of town. People buy donuts in the morning, going in – not in the afternoon going out. That wasn't sin – it was a serious rookie error.

When we recognize our dire circumstances come from sin, we confess...and quickly. Then, importantly, we receive and appropriate God's grace and forgiveness. We don't avoid the consequences, but we continue in fellowship with the Lord.

One mistake Christians often make is assuming tough times result in automatic spiritual growth. After the furnace, some walk out as giants; others are scooped up as a pile of ashes. The children of Israel wasted their time in the desert, not learning and eventually dying.

On the other hand, Joseph served a term of 13 years in prison and came out, rising to Prime Minister. Joseph learned. He grew in wisdom, in his faith, and in his ability to serve.

The Apostle Paul gave thanks for his imprisonment as the gospel went out throughout the Roman Empire. He grew in his knowledge of the Christ and in his service to the churches. He outlined the process in his letter to the Romans: "Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (Romans 5:4-6 NET Bible)

Points to Ponder

- 1) How have I grown spiritually in the last year?
- 2) Who is God?
- 3) How do I deal with God's silence?
- 4) What question would I like to ask of God?
- 5) How do I see God's faithfulness in my life?

Words of Wisdom: "Learning to appreciate God's silence is part of our spiritual growth."

Wisdom from the Word: "I am also aware that you have persisted steadfastly, endured much for the sake of my name and have not grown weary." (Revelation 2:3 NET Bible)

Brenda's Perspective

"I want Grandmother and Grandfather to be on the first floor," said my daughter Heather when she was five. "Why," I asked. "Because it would be so much more comfortable," she answered as she stretched to reach the button for the 6th floor in the hotel elevator. I laughed and then realized how often I say that to God. "Why do I have to stretch? Why are you silent? Why the trials? I want to love You and serve You, but I also want to be comfortable."

One of Dad's admonitions to me was "never lose the good of a bad experience." Growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ clearly represents good in the bad situations. But it's not easy.

Being a cause and effect Christian leads to distraction and distress. Thinking God loves me more when I read, pray, give, and witness is just flawed as thinking He loves me less when I fail

Him. Scripture tells us we plant, but the increase is His. It is the same way with our spiritual growth. Just as the seeds need time for germination, seasons of trials break us down and prepare us for His harvest. The hymnist talks of “seed time and harvest” as part of His great faithfulness to us. Let us give thanks – and grow.

Last Words from Fred

Let me tell you a story about perseverance. For fifteen years I served on a board with a man who was Chairman of a New York City based corporation. He served as President of his denomination's lay board, in addition to sitting on the board of other Christian seminaries and organizations. He was a man of substance and integrity. His wife was socially prominent. All who knew him regarded him as highly successful. Little did I know how greatly he suffered during this time. His story could bring tears to the eyes of Job.

Nothing in his attitude, or his participation on the board, ever hinted at the depth of his hurt. In all of our meetings, he was positive, constructive, and loving. Two or three times a year he called with an encouraging word because he read something I wrote or said.

As I started studying perseverance, I wanted to hear his whole story because I only had bits and pieces. I knew there must be more. I needed to have that more in order to prepare for these lessons. This is what he told me.

What he was Chairman, ensconced in a large Manhattan tower office his company was attacked by a hostile raider. Two of the corporate officers were his close friends and confidants. My friend personally borrowed \$600,000, ran up large attorney fees, and spent months warding off the vultures. At the end of an unsuccessful battle, he found that his two friends and associates betrayed him, going over to the other side for personal gain.

Subsequently, he was replaced as chairman and offered a city sales job with a small desk in an open cubicle. The raiders assumed a man of his stature could not endure such humiliation. They were wrong. He took the job. Not because he wanted to, but because he felt he had a responsibility to the company and his faithful employees.

The new regime took away all his executive privileges and embarrassed him as much as possible. He continued to go door to door with his briefcase, meeting with customers who knew him as Chairman. As the company began to fall into trouble, they assigned more and more marketing responsibilities to him. He took them without demands. While three of their competitors failed, his company made money. He worked hard to protect the jobs of his associates.

Although he was in charge of the marketing department, he was persona non grata. The new President didn't acknowledge him, or even meet for updates. I broke into his story to ask, "How could you work for those fellas?" His answer stunned me: "I have never worked for them. I work for the Lord."

And then he quoted these verses from Paul's letter to the Colossians: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Then he repeated, "Fred, I never worked for them; I work for the Lord."

When we talked about his two friends who betrayed him, he admitted that Christian brothers had "done him in." But he wasn't looking for revenge. With my usual analytical approach, I asked him to outline what he had learned from his experience. "I learned I didn't have to commit suicide, even though I considered it when my two friends betrayed me. I learned not to have any bitterness, believing the Lord holds the rights to vengeance, not me." He knew bitterness would destroy him, and not those who had harmed him.

Patently, he paid the \$600,000 personal debt and the attorneys' fees. He reflected, "I have no ulcers. I have not missed a single night's sleep." He confidently expressed his trust in an all-sufficient God. He pointed out "fear not" is the most repeated admonition of the Lord as it is used hundreds of times in Scripture.

Finally, he learned to rest in the promise of God. He used Scriptural principles like pitons in the face of the mountain, holding the climber's life and trust. As he ascended the bluff, he drove in Scriptures, tying his rope to them, knowing they held him firm and safe.

He persevered – he grew- he triumphed.

Bless you as you persevere.

A Last Word from Brenda

“Delightfully dependent” is the way Dad described himself in his years of immobility. I will tell you there were some not-so-delightful moments, but his self-discipline rarely failed. I watched him closely and he truly lived out his faith-based principles.

He lived with me in my house for seven years. Both of our lives changed dramatically. We learned much about each other. One thing never changed – he persevered. He prayed daily for the salvation of many, for the protection of even more, and the productivity of us all. He controlled his spirit, even while nudging me toward “getting a grip.”

Dad had his human frailties, but failing to endure wasn't one of them. He knew his strength came from the Lord. “Through it All” by Andrae Crouch was one of his favorite choruses. He listened to it on a Bill Gaither homecoming video over and over. Whenever a group came over we sang around the piano, and he wanted us to finish with it. Each day we read together for an hour. The day before he died, we read. I spoke the words, “I've learned to trust in Jesus – I've learned to trust in God.” He hoarsely repeated them. Those were his last audible words.

He fought the good fight and finished well. He persevered and undoubtedly received the warm welcome of our Lord and Savior.

My prayer is that you may grow in the knowledge of our heavenly Father and live a life through the Spirit of endurance, bringing glory and honor to the Lord Jesus Christ.