<u>Series</u>: *WHEN NO ONE'S LOOKING*—October 1, 2006

NEVER GIVE UP!
Hebrews 12:1-2; James 1:2-4

I. INTRO

A. When I first started running regularly back in 1993, I discovered something almost immediately that I'd read about. It's this exhilarating feeling—the rhythm of breathing—your heart beating fast. You feel healthy—like you could just run for ever. Its called ***runner's high.*** For me it lasted about 15 feet.

1. If you've ever watched a marathon, you've probably seen it. Everyone's bouncing around, high fiving, playing to the crowd. One writer wrote about a marathon in LA that had ***18,000*** people running in it. There were some very colorful characters who started the race—like ***T-Bone the Clown,*** and ***Flower Man.*** There were also 13 people running together in a specially made centipede costume.

   -Everyone starts with a bounce, but in any marathon, there comes a point where the urge to quit is almost overwhelming—when your lungs and your legs are burning. It's called…***Hitting the Wall!*** At this point of the LA marathon, ***T-Bone the clown*** wasn't working the crowd; Flower Man had wilted; and the centipede was draped over a fence, heaving all thirteen stomachs simultaneously. 18,000 started, but there weren't 18,000 finishers!

2. The Bible often compares life to a race—as the ultimate race. And like any race, anyone can start well; but it's ***finishing*** well that counts.
   And, like any race, sometimes we hit the wall where the urge to quit is overwhelming.

B. The writer of Hebrews takes us on a walk through the Bible Hall of Fame, pausing for a while to tell each of their stories. He makes it clear that they were only able to finish their race because of their faith in a God who was way bigger than them and any obstacle they faced.
-Then He tells us that we need to finish well, because, see, this race we're in is not for exercise or for a trophy. It's the real thing. It's for keeps. It's our part in God's plan to redeem this planet. Let's read what he says:
Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and 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 (Heb. 12:1-2 NIV).

-Some of you this morning feel like you've hit the wall in some area of life—and you're tempted to just give up or give in. My prayer for you is that no matter ***how*** you feel, you'll keep on running! And I want to tell how you can, and why it's worth it all.

II. JOSEPH'S *GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS* STORY

A. Any of you ever heard a good news/bad news story? Here's one. It was a tough scene for the Nazi soldiers fighting at the Russian front of WW2. Food and supplies were scarce, changes of clothes were unheard of, morale was low.

One day an officer flew in and gathered together all these shivering, tattered soldiers. He said, "Today, men, vee haf some goodt news, and vee haf some badt news. First, da goodt news. Today, vee get a change of untervear!" There was cheering, whistling, cat-calling. Then the officer said, "Now, for da badt news. Hans, you change with Fritz; Shultz, you change with Herrman…."

1. The story of Joseph is a little like a good news/bad news joke. You may recognize parts of it from ***Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat.***
   -Joseph is Daddy's favorite son. That's really good news—for him, anyway. But his brothers hate his guts. That's very bad. His Dad gives him a special coat. That's very good. But his brothers rip it off, pretend he's dead, and sell him into slavery in a far-off place. That's very bad.

   -But, a wealthy official in Pharaoh's court, named Potiphar, buys him. He likes him, and puts him in charge of everything he has. That's very good!
   -Bu-u-ut…Joseph is well-built and good-looking, and the boss's wife tries to get him to go to bed with her. That's really bad! He resists—and runs away. That's very good. But, Potiphar's wife is furious and lies, saying he tried to molest her--and since this is before sexual harassment laws, Joseph goes to prison. That's very bad.
   -But he gains the warden's favor, and after interpreting a dream for a fellow inmate, Pharaoh's cupbearer, Joseph has an agreement with him that when he's restored to his position, that he'll get Joseph released from prison. That's good! But he forgets—and Joseph spends 2 more years in prison. That's very bad.

2. If you know anything about good-news/bad-news stories, what ***matters*** is how they end. If the story ends with bad news—all the good news that went before it seems like a cruel trick to get your hopes up—only to have the ending sucker-punch you. But if **good** wins—if Joseph's story ends well, if my story ends well—then all the bad news gets redeemed. Everything depends on how the story ends.

3. Joseph's story—like many of ours--starts with a dream. Let me give you the context of Joseph's dream. First, his Dad's blatant favoritism—giving him a special coat—was a set-up for jealousy. In fact, the author says,
   When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to them (Gen. 37:4 NIV).
   -It's right after this comment that Joseph gathers all his brothers around him to tell him about his dream. He says, in essence, "Hey, guys, I had this really cool dream about how we were all out gathering sheaves—and suddenly **my** sheaf rose up real high and **yours** bowed down to it! Isn't that the coolest dream you've

   ever heard? If that wasn't enough, later on he tells them another dream that the sun, moon ***and*** stars would bow down to him."

   -Now, is Joseph being insensitive the pain his father's favoritism had caused—or is he trying to say, "You don't like me now, but ***one*** day you'll be sorry!"
   a. Well, one day he wakes up—and suddenly life was not all that he'd dreamed it would be. Some of you know what that feels like.

-Jacob sends Joseph on a routine visit to his brothers, and things heated up. In a single visit, he moves from #1 favorite son—to slavery, sold to some Ishmaelite traders. Suddenly he's far from his dad, far from home, and far from his dream—all alone. His dream died.

b. This betrayal and pain and humiliation was Joseph's first test, and it would've been ***very*** easy for him to quit. I mean, his dream was dead—full rigor mortis! He could've said, "I'm a slave. ***That's*** my reality!" But Joseph didn't give up. The story says that even with Joseph's dream in full rigor mortis, ***…the Lord was with him…and he prospered.*** Potiphar saw his incredible potential and promoted him to Chief of Staff in his household.
-Question: What if Joseph had just quit? We live in a culture where people do that all the time. They hit a tough spot in a friendship or a marriage and say, "Wait a minute! I didn't sign up for this kind of hassle." Living on a budget, serving in the church, doing an exercise program. The problem is, when you quit—you kick down part of the interior wall in your life. And it's harder to stay in the game—and easier to quit the ***next*** time.

4. Joseph hits another wall. At first his boss loves him and trusts him with everything Enter Potiphar's wife who is just as persistent as Joseph is perseverant—only her goal is to get him into bed with her. Joseph is probably about 20, red, hot blood flowing through his veins—this woman's after him ***every*** day. And this is Joseph's second crossroads. Temptation. When life doesn't turn out like you dream it will, you and I encounter temptation.
   a. Listen to Joseph's resolve in talking to her:
      My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a <u>wicked</u> thing and sin against God (Gen. 39:9 NIV)
   b. The only way out was for him to leave his coat behind and run. It occurs to me that some of you this morning are faced with dreams that aren't coming together—and you're facing ***serious*** temptation of some kind—and you need to ***run! Run away!***
5. So, she lies, and Joseph ends up in prison. Not like our prisons that are reasonably clean—and there are showers, food and color TV—but a ***hole.*** This was ***worse*** than slavery. If you're a slave, there's at least ***some*** respect. Not here. And it's not like people would believe Joseph's story. "The bosses wife was after me and I resisted." not in a cement block place where there's at least

   -Joseph lost everything—but God. God was there—once again, even in prison, Joseph prospers—to the point where he's **chief of staff** in prison! God has a sense of humor. When life hit the wall, Joseph kept running the race.
   a. Joseph sees two former personal assistants to Pharaoh one morning who had had very strange dreams on the same night—and he asks them why they're troubled. Something's happened to Joseph; this guy who once couldn't see the pain in his own brothers eyes over his Dad's favoritism now notices when two strangers have had bad dreams. Interesting, isn't it, how pain sensitizes you to others?

      -Joseph interprets their dreams—and everything happened just as he said it would. The cupbearer would be restored—and the baker would be

executed. Joseph had begged the cupbearer, "Remember me when you get your life back!" But he didn't—and Joseph—stayed in the hole—and persevered--for 2 more years.

b. And then in a single day, everything changes. Pharaoh has a ***very*** strange dream and is looking for someone to interpret it. Suddenly his cupbearer hits forehead and says, "***DOH!*** I just remembered! There was this young Hebrew slave in prison who interpreted my dream…" So, Joseph is cleaned up, clothed, and brought to Pharaoh. Not only does he interpret the dream about Egypt's future of seven years of plenty and seven years of drought, he lays out a plan for Pharaoh to ***save the nation!***
-Pharaoh says, ***You de man!—***and promotes him do the job—and, eventually to second in command in the entire country.

6. So, is Joseph's pain over? Think prestige, power money and luxury can make memory of your Dad and the hatred and betrayal of all your brothers—okay? I don't think money, power and success can heal all that.

-And so…we have the rest of the story. This famine Joseph predicted drives his brothers right into his lap—asking to please sell him food. Only—they don't have a clue that they'll have to face Joseph.

a. This is where you see the stuff that's been built into Joseph—and why he's where he is. His perseverance in the face of hatred, unfairness, betrayal, temptation and injustice has forged incredible character into the core of his life.

-I don't have time to get into the details of everything, but Joseph puts them through a process that looks like he's playing games, like a cat with a mouse before it kills it. But what you realize is that it's a process of reconciliation—determined to see if, given the opportunity, they'll do that same thing to their younger brother that they did to him.

And God was testing him—the final exam—would he get revenge when he could—or not. What gives his heart away is his crying. He cries like a baby--first privately, then openly—and in the end, the reconciliation is complete. Joseph's perseverance has brought his life full circle—and he has this incredible hope for the future of his people.

b. Joseph's epilogue is:
You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them (Gen.50:20-21 NIV).

B. The dictionary defines perseverance as persisting in an undertaking—staying the course—in spite of opposition or discouragement. Refusing to give up when everything in you wants to.
Perseverance is what babies do when they're learning to walk; when they fall down, they cry a little, but get back up and try again. Perseverance is what students do when they've got two papers due, and 5 exams to study for. Perseverance is what young Mom's do when they have 3 children under 5—and they're trying to get ready for church!

-To get to where he needed to be, to where God was calling him to be, Joseph ***had*** to persevere. He had to persevere through betrayal, through fear, through humiliation, through sexual temptation, through injustice, through loneliness and boredom and feeling like he was wasting his life. He did all that—ended up powerful and successful—and still had a heart and an incredible relationship with God! How? ***How did he do that?***

III. DESTINATION—WITHOUT THE TRIP

A. How many of you have at ***least*** one unfinished project at home? How many of you have four or more? Wouldn't it be great if you came home one day—and all the projects were done—without the mess, without the sweat, without you having to figure out where the heck you left off—and where all the pieces are?

-All of us would like to be known as ***finishers.*** But sometimes we ***don't*** finish. When it comes to projects, I guess it's not that big of deal, really. But with ***life—***well, you ***want*** to finish well there. But you can't have the destination without taking the trip. I want to be a person who perseveres, don't you? Like Joseph.

1. Listen to what the Bible says about perseverance:

…We also *rejoice* in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Rom. 5:3-5 NIV).

Another passage:

Consider it pure *joy*, my brothers and sisters, 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 (James 1:2-4 TNIV).

a. Remember how we started—good news/bad news? The good news is at work and He has a plan and He is doing something great in us. ***That's*** the destination. That's the ***good news!***

-Can anyone guess what the bad news might be? Let me quote from these verses: ***we know that <u>suffering</u> produces perseverance.***

Another one: ***…you <u>know</u> that the <u>testing of your faith</u> develops perseverance.***

Now, does that sound as backwards to you as it does to me?

That suffering ***develops*** perseverance? My first thought is, "Hey, God—I need perseverance to ***make*** it through the suffering and testing. Where's that?"

b. Let me tell you what I believe it's saying. It's talking about ***conditioning.*** Think about it: How do you run a marathon, bench press 320 pounds, or do surgery on someone's brain? You don't just ***do*** it. It takes conditioning; practice.

-Surgeons take years of preparation and conditioning and learning and overtime—suffering, if you will, before they can walk into the OR on 4 hours of sleep and do 12 hours of emergency brain surgery where a life hangs in the balance.

c. I think most of us would like to think that we can just ask God to zap us, install steel in our spine and glue in our will—and then we'll be set for anything that comes along. But you and I know that you never build emotional or physical or spiritual strength that way.

2. Let me read something at the very start of both passages—and see if you can guess what the common denominator between them is.
Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds (James 1:2 NIV)
Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings (Romans 5:3 NIV)

a. Is there a word that clicks—but seems a little out of place? It's the word ***joy*** and ***rejoice.***
-Now, think for just a minute.
If your joy barometer rides on how well things are going for you, how much of a shining star you are and how well-loved and appreciated you are—think that will help you persevere?

b. I think that if we're going to persevere, our joy had better be based on something bigger than whether life is going well, cotton's high, sky's blue and birds are a-singin'. Again, ***how?***
-Listen to how the passage I read at the beginning of the message starts:
Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross (Heb. 12:2 NIV).
-How did Jesus, our example, make it through the suffering of the cross? Well—it was in looking ***forward*** to the joy of the ***billions*** of people who's eternities would be changed—and how that would radically alter life on this planet. Freeing and redeeming and transforming it all. How cruel, selfish people would learn to love and give.

c. For us to ***endure*** suffering, we have to sense that there's a point to us—***even if we don't know what it is!*** And that's where the Bible fills the gap—particularly in this passage. It says, "Your suffering isn't punishment because you're bad; it's **not** senseless and pointless."
-You could put it like this:
God is at work—and difficulty, suffering is His boot camp. You're his kids. What you go through may seem unbearable—but you can make it, because you will never be alone. God will quietly, silently be with you and give you strength for anything He's allowed you to be in. God doesn't cause it--but He does use it. It doesn't feel like it now—but there* is *joy.

d. But to actually make it through the suffering that develops perseverance takes ***faith.*** Confidence in both the character and the power of God.
This confidence that you ***will*** make it and that God will make you someone who doesn't just begrudgingly ***survives*** tough times—but becomes an incredible person in the process.
-And that, in turn, builds hope. Hope that God is in control—past, present, future—it doesn't matter. That all you love and care about is secure. And that hope helps you face the next crisis—cause there ***will*** be one!

B. There are some questions about perseverance that I think come up in everyone's mind.

1. I think the first is—what do you do when you crash and burn. I mean you're in the fetal position, hope is gone and life is very dark? This is major trouble—

sometimes personal failure; sometimes a collapse from working too hard. It's the straw that put the camel in a full body cast.

-Bible gives a great case study of a big-dog prophet, Elijah, who crashes. He goes from a mountain top victory with God—to sitting under a bush, moaning, asking God to take him out. It's interested to see how God handles him.

a. First, just like we do with our kids when they're crabby and whining, he gave him something to eat and put him to bed! Even big-dog prophets are human and have to care for the basics. Oh, and take note of this. We do too! In fact, tough times require that you pay even better attention to rest and food than when life is soaring.

b. Second thing—God reveals a different side to Himself. He's not just a God of power and thrust—He's the God of the still small voice. And sometimes we just need to be quiet and let God work through the obstacles—and not blow them off the path.

c. God's final move is to give Elijah a traveling companion. Elisha. Someone with his heart—and someone who will never leave his side.

-Know what got the POWs in Vietnam through years of torture and unbelievable emotional pressure? Companionship—and ***communication.*** Friends, listen to me; We were ***made*** to be close to others—others who will walk with us, tell us we're not thinking straight, help us when we fall, encourage us when we're ready to just give up and suck our thumbs. That's why we have Roots groups—and if you haven't signed up, ***Do it!*** You were ***made*** for close friends—and you never find them by looking at the back of their heads!

2. And that brings up another question. Is there a time to give up on a dream? Not give up on ***life,*** but give up on a certain direction we've taken?

a. I had just spent all afternoon working on writing this message and was in a hurry to leave the office. In my hurry, I clicked the wrong thing and lost ***everything I'd written.*** I immediately called Lori—who is now the family computer expert—and we worked for about 45 minutes—trying to find any vestige of what I'd written on my computer. I finally had to give up on my dream of saving the message—and start re-writing.

b. When we have a dream, we have to sometimes distinguish between perseverance—and stubbornness. Sometimes we need to know when to cut our losses and move in a different direction. Dr. Henry Cloud has written an excellent book entitled, ***Integrity.*** In one of his lectures a woman asked, "If you could tell parents what the *one thing* is that is most important to teach their kids about success, what would it be?" He said, "I would teach them how to lose." She looked at him like he had three heads and said, "Why in the world would you want to teach them how to lose?" ***Because they will!*** *w*as the answer Henry gave.

c. Sometimes the truth about life is that things don't turn out well. Sometimes you can't fix things—no matter how creative, resourceful and perseverant you are! More perseverance in the wrong direction tends to get you more lost—and in the process, you burn down through more energy and time.

3. Joseph's story is really a story about him persevering in his faith that God had a bigger plan. See, the part of the dream he caught and bragged about was everyone bowing down to him. That's pretty ego-centric. ***God's*** dream was that

he save his family and save the lineage of the Messiah—whose coming was 2000 years away.

a. How many of you think that his dream would've come true if he'd remained favorite son #1, wearer of designer coats? He may have led the family clan—but he never would've been COO of Egypt!

b. What about as a slave. What if he had worked his way even further up in Potiphar's house—without the wife's interference? Well, he probably would've disappeared from history, inherited—as slaves were--by Potiphar's kids along with all the other property.

c. The ultimate humiliation for Joseph was ending up in an Egyptian prison—innocent, and humiliated. I thought about another ***what-if***. What if the cupbearer had immediately remembered him—and he'd gotten out of jail. I think he would've gone right back to his family before anything else happened. And he'd have been long gone when, 2 years later, Pharaoh needed help with a dream—and he would've missed his destiny.
-What got Joseph through this time was his trust and his hope in a God whose ways and timing are ***perfect.***

4. Some of you this morning are in the ***hit the wall*** phase of what has been a very long journey. You're tempted to give up—I mean, you're thinking, "I'm exhausted! I just can't take another step!" And Satan reinforces this by whispering in your ear—the words from a Few Good Men. ***You can't handle the truth! You won't make it!***
-For some of you, this is in a relationship that has just gotten so painful, so infected, so chafed. For some of you, it's parenting. It feels like every day is uphill—this steep climb, and there's nothing at the top except more mountain. Some of you have hit obstacle after obstacle at work or in your business. And you're just tired. Really tired.
-Some of you are exhausted by relentless temptation. And you just want to do something dirty and cheap. Whether it's the temptation to cheat, to take a step toward addiction, to lie or get revenge--the thought occurs to you, "What's the use? Like, what's the reward here? Financial or sexual or relational frustration? And I want to urge you, plead with you, ***keep on running! Don't give up. Never give up!***

a. See the question you have to ask is, "What will giving do for you—except to relieve the pain and the pressure? If you break down that inner wall of resistance, not only will you miss the character God is building, you will be much more prone to give up the next time tough times hit. Something else, when you give up and stop running the race, ***it's THEN*** that you're suffering is worthless; senseless. I'll bet ***you're closer to the finish line than you think you are!***

b. I found something out in running last week. I found that if I walked for a while—I could run further and with more energy. Sometimes we need the Elijah treatment. Slow down, get some rest, get some nourishment and rest, get some perspective—and walk with a friend. Another prophet, Isaiah, said:
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Is. 40:30-31 NIV).

-Wouldn't it be great to soar through life—from mountaintop to mountaintop? How's the relationship with your boyfriend? ***Soaring.*** How are things with your kids? ***Soaring—flyin' high!*** How's the job goin'? ***Man, I'm SOARIN'!*** Build nests from which to watch all the ***smaller*** people down below? But that's not life. Not for Jesus; not for us, not for anyone, really.

-This passage makes it clear that sometimes we don't soar—we run, and God gives us strength to run. And sometimes we can't even run—we ***walk!*** And God helps us there to not pass out, give out, or give up.

c. I don't know what **you're** up against—but I ***do*** know God is up to something, and if you'll put your hope in Him, if you'll keep keepin' on, you'll be ***so*** glad you did.

IV. YOU'RE CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

A. In closing, I want to give you two reasons, and two stories about why you need to persevere.

1. First, you need to keep going for your ***own*** sake. You can ***earn*** money or degrees; you can ***buy*** stuff; you can ***find*** success; you can ***have*** children, but character is ***forged.***

-Forged steel is the toughest in the world. Know how they make it?

We used to drive by the ***Erie Forge*** on our way to church. You could hear it before you saw it. ***Bam! Bam! Bam!*** Then you could see through the open doors, sweaty dirty men wearing hard-hats, heating steel white-hot—then pounding it with hydraulic hammers. That's the forge. Life heats up—and you feel like you're getting the begeebers beaten out of you.

If you'll let Him, God will do something amazing in your heart; there will be both a toughness to you—and a tenderness that comes no other way.

2. Second. It's not all about you. Let me explain. A few weeks ago Lori and I watched a show on The Discovery Channel called, ***I Shouldn't Be Alive.*** The one we saw was story about a young couple with a 6 month old son who took a wrong turn on the way to a funeral and wound up stuck in a snow drift in a blizzard in the boonies of Nebraska.

-After sitting in the truck a couple of days, they decided to walk.

They walked most of a day through deep snow—only to realize they were going the wrong way.

After taking refuge in a cave for the night, the young Mom's feet were badly frost-bitten, and she had to stay in the cave with the baby.

-The guy made it back to the truck—only to see a sign telling him that he would have to walk 67 miles through deep snow—on no food—to get help.

The ***only*** thing that kept him alive was the sight of his wife and baby in the cave waiting for ***him*** to get help. Somehow, against all odds, he did. They lost their toes, but they have their lives—and their baby.

-There is more resting on your perseverance than you could begin to realize. With Joseph—it was the whole future of the Jewish race—the Messiah. We have been impacted by ***his*** perseverance.

B. I need to tell you again: Don't give up—because you're ***way*** closer to the finish line than you think. Keeping running. ***Never*** give up. ***Never!***