

Endure to the End

Hebrews 13

One of the most impressive stories from the Olympics is about a runner from Tanzania—John Stephen Akhwari—who competed in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. He competed in the marathon, but he faced challenges he wasn't prepared for. The race started at the hottest part of the day, and he'd been unable to train at the altitude he had to run in. He was knocked down as runners jockeyed for position, and hurt his knee and shoulder so badly officials begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. When John was asked why he didn't drop out of the race, his answer said it all: "My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race; they sent me five thousand miles to finish the race." Can you imagine? John's story went down in Olympic history and was dubbed "The Greatest Last Place Finish Ever."

I'm not a runner, but I'm told by those who are that it's not the physical training and preparations that are the hardest part. It's the mental part. Physical training makes your body able to endure the rigors of the race. But it's the mental part, knowing that you can do it, is the hardest part. It's the part that makes it able to endure.

How can we do that? "People need a powerful why if they are going to be able to endure any how," wrote New York Times columnist David Brooks, echoing the words of Nietzsche, that were made famous by Viktor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*. If we are to endure, the question isn't how we endure. The question is why we should endure.

Endurance is "the ability to withstand hardship or adversity." It's the capacity and power to bear up under difficult circumstances. It's a hopeful fortitude that perseveres to the end. It is

a quality built by remaining under pressure, something our natural inclination wants to drift away from. And we need a why to be able to endure. We can endure much more when there is both perspective (a great view) and progress (actually going somewhere).

If you had to do a ten-mile hike, would you rather do it outside going up a mountain trail or inside on a treadmill set at a steep incline? Most would opt, even if it was much harder, for the mountain trail. Why? Because we can endure much more when there is both perspective (a great view) and progress (actually going somewhere).

That's what we see here in the concluding chapter of Hebrews, chapter 13. It reminds us of the importance of enduring to the end. It also gives us practical advice for how to endure to the end. We get practices and perspective to keep us going. This is the chapter that declares, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (v. 8), and that is a reminder we need to hear in a world full of change. But we also need to hear the chapter's many instructions for the Christian life under pressure, instructions on how to endure.

First and foremost, let brotherly love continue. Or as another translation puts it, "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters" (v. 1). Endurance happens in community, and love is what keeps us together. Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* has gained importance for the way that it connects the high anxiety of people today, especially younger people, to the use of smartphones and social media. But the book traces the problem back even earlier, to the loss of community that began in the 1960's. Without community, it's easier to be anxious. It's harder to endure.

The next verses continue to remind the Hebrews of the importance of community, as they're reminded to show hospitality and visit those in prison. Honor marriage. Reject sexual immorality and love of money, two of their culture's greatest idols, and it is true of ours as well. Beyond that, remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you, and avoid "all kinds of strange teachings". Do good, share what you have, obey your leaders, pray for others.

Why should we do these things? Author Dorothy Bass writes, "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Christ Jesus." There is a connection between individual spiritual disciplines (e.g., fasting, prayer, Bible reading, and tithing) and practices as "clusters" of activities (such as worship, community, hospitality, and formation that are made up of individual disciplines) that endure over time to form characteristics in the life of a Christian (such as humility, generosity, kindness, and godliness). Like training for a marathon, these practices help us to get in shape for the long marathon of life. Individual spiritual disciplines help, but most Christian practices need other Christians around.

Every Christian needs the encouragement of every other Christian. Everyone who comes through the door of a place of worship is a real encouragement to everyone else who is there. This is part of the way, along with an actual word of encouragement when necessary, in which we can 'stir one another up' to work hard at the central actions of Christian living, 'love and good works. And we need this encouragement all the more as we believe that we are drawing closer to the great day when, with Jesus' reappearance, God will complete his work of new creation.

Endurance. It's what you and I both need to keep moving forward in this life. Against all odds. Against all opposition. Against all setbacks, disappointments, and disillusionments. When nothing turns out like we expect. When, despite all the pain, we need to get back up and keep running our race. It's what we'll need to finish all that we start.

There's a reason stories of endurance continue to be popular. Homer's epic struggle to return home in *The Odyssey* is still required reading thousands of years after it was first told. John Bunyan's allegory of Christian's journey to the celestial city in *The Pilgrim's Progress* has appeared in 200 languages and has never gone out of print. Peter Jackson has brought almost a billion visitors to Middle Earth to follow Frodo and Samwise Gamgee's mission to destroy the ring of power, and Tolkien's books continue to be bestsellers. We continue to find inspiration in Anne Frank's hiding place in Amsterdam and Louie Zamperini's unbroken determination in Japanese prison camps.

There's two meanings to the word endure. The first has to do with being patient or resilient, exercising perseverance, showing determination and resolve. In this sense, endure is most often used to describe something that people are forced to do (or not). The second sense has to do with permanence, stability, and dependability. In that case, endure isn't something someone does. It's something or someone else, but it's something that makes it easier for people to endure.

We can endure because of what Jesus endured for us on the cross. We can endure because of what Jesus endured for us outside the gate, going into the unclean places to make us clean. We can endure because Jesus endures, is always the same yesterday today and forever. We can endure because we are not alone. We

can endure “because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” That is why we can “say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’” That is why we know that even though “here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (v. 14).

There is much for us to endure this time of year. Students, faculty, and staff at Iowa State and in other schools are trying to endure until Thanksgiving break and until the end of the semester. Watching Cyclone teams can require endurance, watching to the end to see if a victory can be pulled from the jaws of defeat. We’ve endured another election and all of the campaigning and negative ads that come along with it, but now we have to endure post-election political posturing. Winter is coming, and we have to endure the darkness and cold that is coming.

But we can endure whatever hardships come our way. We can endure because we have a why. We can endure because we know what Jesus has done for us. We can endure because we know what we’re looking forward to. We have the perspective of where we’re going, the heavenly city. We have the perception of progress, knowing we’re one day closer to Jesus’ return than we were yesterday. We have the promise that we will never be forsaken or left alone. That’s why we can endure to the end.

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