Endure

Hebrews 11-12

With the beginning of the school year just over a week away, student athletes are beginning to train. The high school cross country runners run past my house in north Ames occasionally, and I get to watch them run, usually in small groups, shouting words of encouragement as they do their training runs. They have to do the physical training so they can endure running the longer races.

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.

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 of 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 are 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. It 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 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?'" 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.

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.

Hebrews 11 gives us many stories of the great heroes of the faith. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses. The list goes on; discussing people who were a thousand years gone at the time the book of Hebrews was written, almost 2000 years removed from us. When we hear about the heroes of the faith, we remember their struggles, but also why they could endure. When the three young men faced a fiery

furnace, they endured because they were not alone.

When we think about those 12 apostles of Jesus, they went out and every one of them, virtually every one of them died bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The symbols depicting them around the clock in the student center almost all show how they die. Would they have done that for a fable, for a myth, for something was false? Not a chance. James who was opposed to his brother, Jesus, and Paul who was a murderous threat to Christians. Both of them encountered Jesus and were changed for the whole rest of their life and underwent terrible suffering and martyrdom at the last because it's true. They could endure because of the why, the purpose they had in what Jesus had endured for them. They knew what Jesus had endured for them, and they saw how much Jesus loved them, and they never got over it.

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.

Endure was the theme of the LCMS 2025 National Youth Gathering held in New Orleans this summer. Over 20000 high schoolers, youth leaders, young adult volunteers, and others gathered together for worship, service projects, breakout sessions, and more. One of the speakers at the evening mass events was Bethany Hamilton. You may know her story from the film Soul Surfer. She was attacked while surfing off the coast of Hawaii at the age of 13, and a shark bit her arm off. Yet through her faith, she’s endured the challenges that come with the loss of her arm. She returned to surfing, and uses her platform to encourage others in their faith. At the National Youth Gathering, she shared how her faith carried her through loss, recovery, and the unknown. Those who were there were reminded that endurance doesn’t come from within—it comes from the God who never fails. "God doesn’t say life is going to be perfect but He does say His grace is sufficient for us!"

His grace is sufficient. The word used for race in our text also has the connotation of a struggle or fight. That is exactly what we experience every day. As you run the race of faith, you struggle with sweat pouring in your eyes or the tiredness that just makes you want to stop and rest. In our spiritual race we struggle with our sinful nature, the sinful world that surrounds us, and the evil one which all daily try to take our eyes off Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. The witnesses, those who’ve run the race before, know those struggles and temptations.

The writer of Hebrews has one final word of advice. "Let us run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Pioneer translates a particularly rich Greek word, archegos. The archegos is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the trailblazer who goes before us. In the context of a race, the archegos is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates as they followed in his steps. Yet Jesus is not simply the pioneer; he is also the perfecter. Priests perfect and complete what we lack, bringing us to our goal so that we may have full access to the presence of God. So, Jesus not only calls us across the finish line but also fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness. He takes our incomplete faith and makes it whole.

More than just making our faith whole, Jesus makes us whole with each other. While we

think of racing as an individual event, it's not. In high school, runners run as part of a team, and the individual results affect which school wins. Many who train to run marathons train as part of a running club, and even on the day of the race, find someone to keep pace with so they can complete the race. Bikers keep pace with a leader, following the peloton and riding in the draft of those who are in front. Drivers may get the fame in auto races, but they wouldn't make it far without their pit crew. We think of faith as an individual event. It's not. God's purpose is not to save isolated individuals, but to create a community, the church, that cares for each other.

We know 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.

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August 17, 2025