

Truths that are out of fashion Endurance

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Endurance

At school, I used to enjoy sprinting. Being able to sprint fast over short distances was a great asset when playing my favourite sport, rugby. But I struggled over longer distances. I remember my sports teacher entering me for a 200-metre race, twice the distance I usually ran. It was a mistake. Once the race started, I shot off and was well in front of the other runners by the halfway stage, but I soon began to tire, and the other runners overtook me one by one, and I came in last! My teacher was not happy, but he never took the time to explain what I needed to do or train me for the longer distance. Some years later, I was entered for a cross-country race at a boys' camp. I was nervous it would be a repeat experience of my 200-metre disaster, especially as it was a much longer distance. But this time, I paced myself, kept close to the front runners, and, to my complete surprise, won the race.

The endurance race of faith is not a sprint; it is a marathon that can last a lifetime. Like a cross-country race, the terrain is varied, and obstacles abound. Unlike cross-country running, you have no prior knowledge of the course. There are times, like Abraham experience of God calling him to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance. He "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). Endurance sharpens our faith.

Endurance is seen as the ability to get through unpleasant, difficult and painful circumstances. However, in the Bible, enduring is a journey with a victorious end. At the beginning of Hebrews chapter 12, the race of faith is characterised by endurance:

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Hebrews 11, the previous chapter, is about the faith of God's people in the Old Testament. Woven into these stories of great faith is great endurance (Hebrews 11:32-34).

"And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

Amongst the many examples of the people of God exhibiting endurance in Hebrews 11, there are a father and son who teach us so much about this subject but in entirely different ways: Jacob and Joseph.

The Endurance of Jacob

Jacob is one of the least naturally attractive characters in the Old Testament. He was identified as a "grasper" from birth. As he emerged from his mother's womb, he took hold of his older twin brother Esau's heel. It was a prophetic moment that was fulfilled when Jacob first stole Esau's birthright and then his blessing. As a result, he had to flee his home as Esau sought to kill him. He spent the night alone at Bethel on his journey to his uncle Laban's house. That night, God spoke to Jacob in a dream.

"I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" (Genesis 28:13-15).

It took a long time for Jacob to understand the wonder of the words God spoke to him that night. He would have to pass through twenty arduous years in Laban's house, experience the bitterness of failures in his own family and the loss of his son Joseph before he ended his life in worship and the brightest testimony to the wonder of God's grace, "the God who [has been my shepherd] all my life long to this day" (Genesis 48:15).

How did God teach Jacob His grace? Jacob is described as "a mild man, dwelling in tents" (Genesis 25:27). Jacob's mildness and homely ways had disguised his deceitfulness, but family life became the ground on which God developed his faith and its victorious endurance.

People tend to display endurance only in terms of just struggling through difficult circumstances. As Christians, we are inclined to do the same. But in the Bible, endurance is not simply "getting through" or "toughing it out." God intends us to experience the power to endure by overcoming obstacles and developing an enriched and joyous faith. Jacob was a living testimony to the Psalmist's words,

"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Endurance is faith in action, the spiritual quality needed to overcome difficulty and be victorious through Christ alone. God teaches us its spiritual value in our ordinary everyday lives. It doesn't mean we don't deeply feel our weakness in the circumstances we encounter but that we experience the reality of Christ's grace,

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

And the power of faith,

"And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith."
(2 Corinthians 12:9, 1 John 5:4).

Hebrews 11 simply says of Jacob,

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff" (v.21).

Yet behind these simple words was a lifetime of learning the grace of God who Jacob describes as "the God [who has been my shepherd] all my life long to this day." Jacob had sought to find his

own way in life and used deceit to rob his brother of his birthright and blessing as the firstborn child. When these actions endangered his life, God intervened and changed the direction of his life in a display of unconditional grace.

Over the following twenty years, God put Jacob through the most testing circumstances in the home of his uncle, Laban. Laban was a master of deception and deceit. Jacob learned what it was to be deceived and unjustly treated in his uncle's house. On this journey of endurance, Jacob discovered the reality of who he was naturally and, at the same time, the blessing and faithfulness of God; God fulfilled His promises made at Bethel, released him from Laban's control and opened the way for him to return to the land God had promised him. Endurance is a journey which transforms us inwardly; it witnesses to the faithfulness of God, and it always has in view the fulfilment of the promises of God.

On the way home at Penuel, Jacob met God face to face, and Jacob pleaded for God to bless him. In response, God asked, "What is your name?" and he replied, "Jacob," which means a "Supplanter." In grace, God gave Jacob a new name, "Israel", meaning a "Prince with God." But before this remarkable blessing, God blessed Jacob in another way when He touched "the socket of His hip." From that moment onwards, Jacob limped throughout the rest of his life. Every step he took was an act of endurance and, at the same time, a reminder of the day he saw God face-to-face. God told Jacob at Bethel all those years before,

"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" (Genesis 27:15).

At Penuel, His daily walk required endurance and the help of the staff he rested upon as He worshipped at the end of his life in Hebrews 11:21,

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff."

Jacob was a living testimony to spiritual endurance throughout his many challenges. His journey ended in worship and the blessing of his children and grandchildren as God fulfilled his purposes in his life.

The Endurance of Joseph

"By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:22).

Jacob loved Joseph more than all his children because he was the son of his old age and he made him a coat of many colours (Genesis 37:3). Joseph's life begins by knowing he is loved. But, as a consequence, he endured the cruelty of his brothers, slavery in the house of Potiphar, injustice at the hands of Potiphar's wife, and imprisonment. His journey began at the centre of his father's affections and descended into a distant Egyptian prison.

What is remarkable about Joseph is the way he victoriously overcomes the most profound suffering with faith, grace and hope. He brings order and prosperity to every situation he is in, clearly illustrating godly endurance. This young man's faith and character brightened the darkest events. It didn't begin well when Joseph's brothers cast him into a pit and then sold him into slavery. But from the moment he stepped as a slave into the house of Potiphar, Joseph transformed it (Genesis 39:2-3).

"The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand."

But then Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, who resisted her with the words,

"How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (v.9).

These are telling words. Joseph was living his enslaved life not before his Egyptian master but in the sight of God. God's people are still able to be saved from the consequences of sin by asking, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Joseph's faithfulness led Him from slavery into imprisonment. Once again, Joseph prospers in adversity (vv.21-22).

"But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing."

Joseph's endurance develops from managing a house to managing a prison to managing a nation. Underpinning his endurance of unjust suffering was his acceptance that God had placed him where he was. And under whatever conditions Joseph lived, he endured them to serve God. President John F. Kennedy, in his 1961 inaugural address, challenged his fellow Americans with the words, "Don't ask what America can do for you, ask what you can do for America." Joseph didn't ask, "Why am I in prison" But "How can I live for God in this prison?"

In was from prison, Joseph rose to the highest office in Egypt. When his brothers came to him to buy grain, they bowed down before him not knowing the brother they sought to destroy ruled over Egypt. Joseph "remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them" (Genesis 42:9). So began a sequence of events that would lead to the blessing of his family and God's glory in their salvation:

"God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5).

The suffering Joseph endured did not embitter his heart it moved him to compassion. We must never allow circumstances to cause bitterness to rule in our hearts but learn tender-heartedness from the Saviour.

Egypt was never Joseph's home, and when he died, "he gave instructions concerning his bones." Why would Hebrews 11 not mention any of the things Joseph had victoriously passed through? Because his instructions looked to the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph's faithful endurance looked on to a greater day, as does ours. Our endurance is "treasure in heaven," valued and rewarded by the Saviour.

The Endurance of the Saviour

Hebrews 11 summarises the great "cloud of witnesses" we find throughout the Old Testament. These witnesses ran the race of faith with endurance before we did and with fewer resources. Hebrews 12:1-2 begins by presenting Jesus as the greatest example of endurance.

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author [originator, margin] and finisher [completer, Darby] of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him en-

dured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

We are given numerous examples of men and women of faith in the Old Testament who faced significant obstacles and opposition but ran the race of faith with endurance. These faithful witnesses to God are pictured as a heavenly audience now observing us running the race of faith today. But we have an example they did not have. They knew of the coming Messiah but never had a record of His peerless life during their lifetime. They looked on to His coming.

We do have the record of Christ's life and can trace the endurance of His love, grace, and mercy whilst on earth. We can always ask, "What did Jesus do?" Jesus, in resurrection, also explained from the Old Testament "the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). At His ascension, the Saviour never said goodbye. Instead, He promised, "I am with you always." Hebrews chapter 13:5-6 assures that Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you", instilling us with boldness because "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" In John 10, the Saviour describes Himself as the Good Shepherd and speaks about His people as His sheep, explaining that we are eternally secure (John 10:27-30).

"My sheep hear My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one."

Paul writes in Romans chapter 8,

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [As it is written:](#)

'For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv.35-39).

The apostle writes these words in the context of the Lord's people enduring tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and violence" (Romans 8:35-39).

In the same chapter, we learn that the Holy Spirit,

"Also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27).

And,

"It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:34).

We are given so many resources in Christ to enable us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us." Every provision has been made for the race. But there is the danger that we can carry

other unnecessary weights. These weights can be many small things or a few large ones that make the race more difficult and tiring than it needs to be. Weights in this context are burdens. Burdens fall into two categories: those we choose to carry and those that God asks us to carry, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Burdens that hinder us and impede our spiritual progress need to be laid aside.

Serious marathon runners don't carry excess body weight or equipment and don't stop along the way to sightsee or have a meal. They have a single goal: to reach the finish line in the fastest time possible and to be the best they can be.

The weights are not the same for everyone, and we must make our own decisions before God. When it comes to the burdens God asks us to bear, Christ is our strength:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

We can also sin, which from the very beginning "so easily ensnares." Sin must be identified, judged, and left behind to continue to "run with endurance the race that is set before us." Sin is an ever-present danger which undermines our endurance and stops us from running by tripping us up, causing us to fall and halting our progress. We must try to avoid sin and confess it when we do sin (1 John 1:8-10), trust in God's forgiveness and continue to run with endurance, renewed purpose and vigour.

Our endurance race is not the loneliness of a long-distance runner. It is a race run in fellowship with other runners who care for each other. At the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, the British 400-metre runner Derek Redmond had a hamstring injury during the 400-metre semi-final. As he limped painfully along the track to the finishing line, his father ran to help his son get over the line. He finished the race. We are not in a competitive endurance race. We need each other's encouragement and support, and we should give encouragement and support.

The endurance race of faith is like a long-distance cross-country race, not counted in miles but in years. And the key to running with endurance is simple, "looking unto Jesus." Jesus is the name the Saviour was given before He was born at Bethlehem (Matthew 1:21), and it was the name written over His head upon the cross (Matthew 27:37) when He died. Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith. In His life here as the Son of Man, He walked the perfect path of faith and brought it to a perfect conclusion, finishing the work God gave Him to do (John 17:4). His life led to the cross, then to His glorious resurrection and ascension to sit down at the right hand of the throne of God. The joy set before Him was the glory that followed the outcomes of His redemptive work, in love to His Father and us.

"Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (John 17:24).

It is important to fix our eyes upon the Saviour, making Him the object of our worship. Looking unto Jesus, we remember His love. Looking up in faith, we see Him seated in glory, looking forward to the day of His return to His church, His reign as King of kings and Lord of lords, and further still to the eternal day of rest.

In my study, I have a plaque in French which reads, "Courons...les yeux fixés sur Jesus" (Hébreux 12:1). I love the translation, "Let's run...with our eyes fixed on Jesus." Many years ago, on our first visit to Switzerland, we visited the home of a godly couple and enjoyed a happy time of fellowship. As we left, the husband took the plaque from their dining room wall and gave it to us in a spontaneous act of kindness to remind us of the visit. Since then, it has hung on the walls of every house we have lived in. It is a constant reminder to always be "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" knowing that our salvation and that of every redeemed soul is part of "the joy that was

set before Him" as He "endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

But there is one constant to running the race that is set before us, Jesus. He is the Person we should never lose sight of in our journey of faith. The writer of Hebrews cannot encourage us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" without immediately turning our eyes upon Jesus. And he does this in a particular way, by speaking of Jesus enduring the cross. The whole pathway of the Saviour on Earth was characterised by His enduring love, mercy, and grace in the face of the persistent rejection that led to the cross. Yet His enduring of the cross is introduced in the context of "the joy that was set before Him."

Christ's enduring of the cross can be viewed in the light of the seven statements He made during His crucifixion. As He was nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

No matter what hate was manifested towards the Lord, it was answered from a heart that wanted to embrace the lost. This is powerfully demonstrated in the repentant thief. What changed that man who joined the rage against the suffering Saviour with his fellow criminal. What led him to Christ was witnessing the Saviour's peaceful enduring of the cross. And by God's grace he came in all his need to Jesus asking "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And the Lord whilst suffering for the sins of the whole world had the joy of finding one lost soul and peacefully assuring Him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23:43). On the cross Jesus experienced the bitterness of Psalm 142:4, "No one cares for my soul." Yet He does not forget His mother and commits her to the care of John, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to John, "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26-27).

Against this background of enduring love and care for others, the Lord's central cry from the cross was, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). Then it was he endured the full wrath of God's judgment of sin in our place. Afterwards, John records the Lord's exhaustion in two simple words, "I thirst!" (John 19:28). Yet His enduring of the cross enables Him "give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts" (Revelation 21:6). John powerfully contrasts the Lord's suffering cry, "I thirst!" with His victory cry, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). The work was all His own. Luke embraces the enduring of the cross in the name of the Father. As Jesus prays to the Father as He is crucified, so He prays to the Father as the enduring of the cross comes to a close, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." (Luke 23:46). Soon afterwards, He conquered death by His resurrection then ascended in glory to sit "down at the right hand of the throne of God." We have no greater stimulus to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" than the enduring love of Christ upon the cross.

For us it was: our life we owe,
Our joy, our glory, all to Thee;
Thy sufferings in that hour of woe,
Thy victory, Lord, have made us free.
Sir Edward Denny (1796-1889)

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