

Truth On Fire

A Study in Endurance

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Endurance (Part I) – First Mention

Merriam-Webster defines endurance as “the ability to withstand hardship or adversity; the ability to sustain a prolonged stressful effort or activity.” Most of us admire endurance and those who endure. One of my favorite Olympic events is the Marathon—the premier endurance race consisting of a grueling 26.2 miles at a sub-five-minute per mile pace. Any Presidential election season requires candidates to endure Media scrutiny, personal attacks by opponents and the mental-emotional-physical demands of the race. Conventional wisdom says that the ability to endure the rigors of a Presidential campaign is great preparation for the Oval Office.

As we embark upon our multi-missive study of endurance, we will discover that endurance ranks high on God’s list of fundamentals for personal success in things both spiritual and vocational. Endurance is the very essence of the nature of God! The Lord ONLY asks of you and me what he himself possesses in infinite abundance and provides with endless availability to those who rely upon him!

While the word ‘endurance’ does not appear in the KJV, its cousins ‘endure’ (29), ‘endured’ (8), ‘endureth’ (59) and ‘enduring’ (3) occur nearly 100 times. That’s fodder sufficient for a thousand-page commentary. Moreover, it signifies that something the Spirit of God references 100 times in scripture demands our attention. We’ll take the occasion of a few articles to attempt to hit the high points. In this article, we’ll consider the first mention of the word ‘endure’ and its practical significance.

The first mention of ‘endure’ in scripture is an instructive one. The reference is not to soldiers, political leaders or athletes, but to children! The context finds Jacob and his familial entourage in an unavoidable encounter with elder brother Esau after two decades of estrangement (Genesis 33:1-17). Jacob would rather have had his molars extracted with pliers than to face Esau’s angry countenance again. But Esau was a different man. No longer does he harbor resentment and rage, but rather exhibits kindness—an absence of malice—toward his younger brother. Esau’s face was such a “pleasant” surprise to Jacob that he compared it to seeing the “face of God” (33:10).

Esau appears to have had a renewed cohabitation in mind, sort of like old times, when he says “let us take our journey, and let us go” (33:12). He’s willing to lead the way to Seir (33:14) with his 400 men (33:1). But Jacob reminds his brother that there is a danger in “overdriving” the children and the flock (33:13). He reasons that the pace of travel MUST be limited by the ability of the children and the flocks to endure it. His argument: “Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir” (33:14).

The word *endure* is from the Hebrew **regel** (afoot, to move). It signifies the ability to travel on foot. In Jacob’s mind, that ability would be lost if the pace set by the men ‘overdrove’ the ‘tender’ ones (33:13). Little did Jacob know that when he vocalized his thoughts to Esau about the ability of the children to endure foot travel that the Spirit of God would enshrine them in scripture for future generations, and teach us two important lessons.

First, God NEVER overdrives his children. Every child of God has a capacity for spiritual sojourning that can grow or diminish with time. An omniscient Father knows exactly the pace to set for each of them, and provides his own omnipotence as a source of strength for the journey. Thus God in his faithfulness does NOT allow his children to be tempted (tried, tested, pushed forward) above their ability to endure the pace, but will with every temptation also make a way of escape, that they might

be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Secondly, no congregation is able to move forward any faster than the ability of the spiritually 'tender' among them to manage the pace. One of the great values of discipleship is bringing the spiritual infants in a church (assuming there are some) up to a level of maturity that facilitates expeditious spiritual travel. The church that neglects or abandons discipleship will ultimately see its children fall by the wayside.

In our text, Esau apparently agreed with Jacob's logic. He and his 400 grown men beat feet for Seir and left Jacob, the kids and cattle to play catch up at their own pace. Esau offered to leave some of his 400 men to travel with Jacob, but he argued there was "no need" to do so (33:15). When the "soft" traveling pace of Jacob and kinfolk had created enough distance between the two companies, Jacob set his course toward Succoth (33:17). There is no indication the two brothers ever saw each other again.

I realize there is always a danger in trying to read too much into a passage of scripture. But I believe we are well within our limits in drawing these two lessons from the first biblical reference to endurance. It certainly gives us pause to reflect upon our ability (and that of those around us) to endure the pace our heavenly Father sets for us. In the final analysis, we are all foot soldiers of Christ and his Cross. It is NOT his will that ANY of our feet fail as we move along the way!

Endurance (Part II) – The Wisdom of Jethro

Every U.S. President surrounds himself with advisors he believes have a high-level of expertise in a policy area vital to the success of his administration. Prominent among them are Economic Advisor, Secretary of State and Chief of Staff. It is the job of these advisors to keep their ears to the ground, report critical developments to the President, and enable him to take actions that will positively impact the nation. In the ideal scenario, a President gets good advice and makes good decisions from which the nation derives a benefit.

The second mention of the word *endure* in scripture occurs in a context where that scenario plays out exactly as scripted. Exodus 18:1-27 is a chapter of the Bible that records for us the practical outworking of wise advice, so that the advice culminated in policy formation-implementation from which the man of God and a nation under his leadership derived great benefit.

Moses met and married a woman named Zipporah during his fugitive days in Midian. Before the Burning Bush and his return to Egypt, Zipporah gave birth to two sons: Gershom and Eliezer (18:3-4). Zipporah and her sons remained in Midian with her father Jethro while Moses was about the business of delivering God's people from a 400-year Egyptian bondage. When Jethro heard of the great success of his son-in-law, he traveled to Sinai with daughter and grandsons to reunite them with husband-father Moses (18:6).

Jethro was on spiritual cloud nine after Moses shared all that God had done (18:7-12). He "rejoiced" and blessed the Lord and sacrificed to the God who is "greater than all gods" (18:11). At the conclusion of a celebratory day, Moses, Jethro, Aaron and the elders of Israel shared a meal together in honor of God's goodness. As a father-in-law, it brings great joy whenever my daughter's husband experiences a measure of success that directly benefits my daughter and two grandchildren. I can identify with the joy of Jethro!

As an aside (but not an insignificant one), the venue for this family reunion was "the wilderness" (18:5). That word typically makes one think about what is NOT there. But our text is careful to tell us who WAS there, for Moses had encamped "at the mount of God" and the meal shared by Jethro and Israel's leadership was "before God" (18:12). Only the presence of God can make the wilderness a wonderful place to be!

The next day was business as usual. Moses took his customary seat as judge to settle matters of dispute among the people from sunup to sundown (18:13-16). After observing the demands that the millions of dislocated Jews were placing upon Moses, Jethro concluded that he would "surely wear away" if the stress of his position went on unabated (18:18). So Jethro offered advice to Moses with a humility indicative of godliness (18:19-22).

Jethro saw Moses' job as consisting of three critical functions: Intercessor, Educator and Arbitrator. He insisted that NOTHING disrupt his intercessory work on behalf of Israel. Moses would continue to be "for the people to Godward" that he might bring their causes to God (18:19). In addition, NOTHING should hinder his education ministry. Moses would continue to "teach them ordinances and laws, and shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do" (18:20). But Jethro insisted that SOMETHING be done about arbitration. This role should be delegated to other qualified men, who would deal with "every small matter" so that Moses would ONLY have to consider "every great matter" and the "hard causes" (18:22, 26).

Jethro laid out four qualifications for arbitrators (18:21). First, they must be “able men” (i.e., have the moral and mental firepower to discern right from wrong; connect dots in a dispute). Second, they must “fear God” (i.e., be aware of his presence-approval for decisions they render). Third, they must be “men of truth” (i.e., hate a lying tongue; possess the ability to sniff out liars in the litigation process). Fourth, they must be “hating covetousness” (i.e., incapable of being bought or bribed by litigants; immune from money motives in rendering verdicts). The list was not long, but certain to produce a godly judiciary system where “Right” would generally prevail.

Jethro thus concluded his advice: “If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace” (18:23). *Endure* is the Hebrew **amad** (“to stand firm or persist”). Translation: “Moses, if you heed my advice, your primary roles of Intercessor and Educator will not be affected or diminished over time. Moreover, this policy will promote peace among the people.”

One cannot read this story without contemplating the ability of America to endure long term without judgeships populated with the kinds of men Jethro recommended. The wisdom of Jethro was not only embraced by Moses, but by the Apostles as well, who refused to neglect prayer [intercession] and the ministry of the Word [education]” to serve tables (Acts 6:2-4). Men like Stephen and Philip stepped in to handle practical business matters. In the present age, pastors who have such men to help them bear the burdens of ministry are blessed indeed!

Endurance (Part III) – Expressing the Inexpressible

Those familiar with the King James Version are familiar with the use of italics by the translators to express an underlying sense or meaning that was left unexpressed by its authors in the original text. The use of italics was deemed an intellectually honest vehicle for conveying what was clearly intended by an author even though it was not expressly stated. A case in point is Psalm 136—the classic passage regarding the mercy of God!

There is a phrase in Psalm 136 that is the most often-used phrase in all of scripture: “for his mercy endureth for ever.” The exact phrase is employed thirty-five times with twenty-six occurring in Psalm 136. Now, we would all agree that if God uses a word thirty-five times, it behooves us to study-enquire as to its significance. Should an entire phrase with thirty-five repetitions command any less of our attention? It tells me that God wants us to know with unequivocal certainty that at the very core of his being is a mercy that has no expiration date!

In Psalm 136, the word *endureth* is italicized, which means there is no actual Hebrew word for translation into English. What the translators faced was the Hebrew word **chesed** modified by the adjectival phrase “for ever.” Strict translation: “His mercy for ever.” Expanded translation: “His mercy [is a] for ever [kind of mercy].” Translator quandary: What word can we insert that both captures the writer’s intent and smoothes out a slavish translation without doing harm to the original text? In other words, how do we express the inexpressible? *Endureth* was the word they chose. It captures the durative nature of Divine mercy as well as the essence of a mercy that CANNOT be worn down, exhausted or depleted by fallen sinners and their collective demands upon it. It simply endures for ever!

The first mention of the phrase came from the mouth of David as the nation of Israel celebrated the return of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem after a hiatus among the Philistines (1 Chronicles 16:1-36). His oration to Israel took the form of a Psalm that would become a permanent part of Israel’s songbook (16:7). As he concluded his tribute, he said: “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good, and his mercy endureth for ever” (16:34). David’s declaration is the basis for Psalm 136. Goodness and mercy have ALWAYS been traveling companions (Psalm 23:6). God DOES good to men because he IS good! If we connect the dots, we see that the mercy and goodness of God are both peas from the same pod, and will endure as long as the Godhead exists!

The phrase “for the mercy of God endureth for ever” is the refrain-chorus for each of the twenty-six affirmations made by the Psalmist. Each statement of fact serves as a basis for Israel to give thanks to their God for his mercy on their behalf (136:1). Psalm 136 encapsulates Israel’s history from its captivity in Egypt to its establishment in the land. Many have sought to draw a distinction between grace and mercy, saying that the former is God giving sinful men what they do NOT deserve while the latter is God withholding from them what they DO deserve. But Psalm 136 reveals that mercy is a larger umbrella with broader applications. Let’s consider a few.

First, the LORD is the God of gods, the Lord of lords (136:2-3). Egypt was full of gods. Many cultures have a multiplicity of gods. Count them, round them up. They’re ALL subservient to the ONE true God. The world is full of lords (men who exert authority over others). In every case, each operates under the ultimate authority of the LORD. The mercy in these realities lies in the fact that if I, as a sinner saved by grace, submit to and operate under the authority of the Lord Jesus, I need not fear another lord or god. I am free indeed because the LORD is who he is...and I am in him! If these great truths were the

starting point for David in enumerating the mercies of God, they just might be a good place for all of us to start!

Secondly, the LORD “alone doeth great wonders” (136:4). The magicians in Egypt did wonders aplenty, but were trumped at every turn by God’s greater wonders. In David’s mind, no wonder can be considered great if another wonder is able to blow it away. Such are the wonders of God! Therefore we must conclude that God ALONE is capable of great wonders! The mercy here is that “greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Whatever the god of this world does to blow you away, the greater God is able to blow him away!

Lastly, the LORD “giveth food to all flesh” (136:25). He provides both bird and beast with their daily bread. He lavishes mercy upon them inasmuch as they are the work of his hand. Moreover, the “flesh” to which he gives food includes rebellious sinners, including those that crucified his Son. Thus the “goodness of God” is in active and full pursuit of lost men to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Our ability to endure whatever we encounter in life is contingent upon the endurance of God’s mercy! We are ABLE to endure because his mercy DOES endure!. Take mercy out of the equation, and the game is over for us all! BUT his mercy endureth for ever! This was the word chosen by the KJV translators in their effort to express the inexpressible!

Endurance (Part IV) – Considering Christ

Some of the most critical times in our lives are periods of consideration before points of decision. The standout high school athlete with five Division 1 college scholarship offers on the table will consider all options carefully before making a commitment. In better times, the college graduate with three standing job offers from Fortune 500 companies would carefully consider salary, benefits and work environment before choosing an employer. In the race called the Christian life, the disciple who runs is encouraged to consider Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith, as the model for endurance (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The context has to do with the race that is set before us, of which it is said that we should “run with patience” (12:1). The text contains an exercise in redundancy for effect. The words “patience” (with respect to running), “endured” (with respect to the Cross), and “endured” (with respect to the contradiction of sinners) all come from the same Greek root. The noun *patience* is **hupomone**, “an abiding or remaining under.” The verb *endured* is **hupomeno**, “to abide or remain under.”

The word paints the picture of persistence, perseverance. It signifies God placing upon the shoulders of his people the burdens agreeable to his will and purpose. Our job is to stay under the load, continue to bear it, and persist and persevere when circumstances might dictate we jettison the burden and walk an easier, less arduous path. If the believer needs one or more points of reference as motivation, the writer offers (1) the cross that Jesus endured for our transgressions and (2) the contradictions of sinners he endured to get to that Hill of incalculable suffering. What more should a believer need in terms of example in order to endure the rigors of the race?

The verb tenses are instructive. When the writer says Jesus ‘endured’ the cross, he uses the aorist. When he says that Jesus ‘endured’ the contradictions of sinners against himself, he uses a perfect active participle. The use of active voice instead of passive portrays Jesus as a champion (one who actively took on his antagonists) instead of a victim (one forced to endure the contradictions). Expanded translation: “Having persevered through three years of locking horns with sinners with the result that he endured them to the very end, he finally endured that one last comprehensive act of suffering on behalf of the very sinners that opposed him.” Now that is endurance with an exclamation point!

These images in the forefront of our thinking are intended to be motivators to keep us focused upon the race at hand. Mental focus of this sort can serve either as preventive medicine or an antidote for weariness and faintness of mind that can weigh us down. If you and I run long and hard enough, it will likely serve as both!

What does it mean to consider Jesus? The verb *consider* is **analogizomai**. It’s the prefix **ana** (“above, over”) and the root **logizomai** (“to think, ponder”). Our word “logic” comes from this root. It means to think something over, ponder it, to make it an integral part of our thinking process. The noun *contradiction* is **antilogia**. It’s the prefix **anti** (“against”) together with **logia** (“mental processes”). It means to have a mindset contrary to another, thus creating rebellion, strife. It means to gainsay (deny). Rebellion raises its ugly head whenever a subordinate develops a mindset that contradicts that of his superior. The scribes, Pharisees and religious elites crucified the Lord Jesus because they saw in him a superior authority whose thinking they chose to reject.

There is a subtle play on words between ‘consider’ (the mindset of believers toward Jesus) and

'contradiction' (the mindset of sinners toward Jesus). They have a common root, but prefixes that make them exact opposites. Thus Paul said: "the carnal mind is at enmity [warfare] with God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). And James: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). Friends are friends because they share a commonality of thinking. Friendships typically disintegrate when a change in the thinking of either party makes a continued close association impossible.

Christian runners who consider Jesus as a pattern in their thinking will likely endure the same contradictions that Jesus endured. It's not something for which they must strive. It's just that the consistent godliness of life that the considering of Christ creates will, by its very nature, create the requisite friction and resultant contradiction.

There are three good reasons for considering Jesus. First, it's a reality check. The opposition he faced is exactly the kind we can expect if we walk in a godly manner. He is our motivation to keep on running! Secondly, it breeds a spirit of worship. Reflections on his steadfast love cause us to look upon him in awesome wonder. Thirdly, it is therapeutic. Weariness and faintness of soul are the potential pitfalls that our consideration of Jesus are designed to prevent. The considering of Christ is a win-win. It gives glory to him...and grit to us!

Endurance (Part V) – Mentor and Protégé

NFL fans are anticipating the “Luck Sweepstakes” in the next draft. Andrew Luck plays QB for the Stanford football team. He’s a Heisman Trophy candidate and potential number-one draft pick. Some say the winless Indianapolis Colts, if they pick first, will select Luck (the protégé) to play behind future Hall of Famer Peyton Manning (the mentor). It’s a scenario wherein Luck will receive the best QB mentoring the NFL has to offer.

The relationship between mentor and protégé is a powerful one! History is replete with examples of great men who developed their raw potential under the tutelage of a master. The relationship between Paul and Timothy was that of mentor and protégé...but much more. They served together in the Gospel as a father would with his son. In Second Timothy, Paul took the occasion of his Rome imprisonment to pen words of encouragement to his protégé, whose ministry would long outlive the apostle. The theme of “endurance” is again in the spotlight.

The mentor urges his protégé to “endure hardness” (2:3) and to “endure afflictions” (4:5). Both phrases are the translation of the Greek verb **kakopatheo**, the combination of **kakos** (“evil, bad things”) and the verb **patheo** (“to suffer”). The admonition packs power inasmuch as the mentor is serving prison time. He is imprisoned for one reason—the Gospel! One of the sobering surprises endured by young preachers, who envision themselves one day preaching the stars down to (and being loved by) their first church, is the harsh reality that many who name the name of Christ cannot and will not “endure sound doctrine” (4:3).

Thirty years ago I wrote the following adage in the cover of my Bible: “Beware of those who cast down the palm branches at your coming; for they will be the ones who drive the nails at your leaving.” Those who harbor disdain for the Gospel message will often attempt to destroy the messenger! If God has called you to preach the Word of God, and equipped you as a pastor-teacher, be prepared to do a little suffering along the way. It will come from places and in ways that you cannot imagine.

In keeping with what a mentor offers to a protégé, Paul cites his own example of endurance both as a model of consistency and a source of motivation. Paul said: “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2:10). The ‘therefore’ points back to the gospel (the Word of God) and the fact that it CANNOT be bound or made subject to prison chains (see Acts 16). So, as the model Christian soldier, the mentor encourages the protégé to go and do likewise (2:3-4).

Who are the elect ones for whom Paul endured all things? The first possibility is Israel—God’s chosen people. Paul testified to the persistent sorrow and great heaviness of heart he endured for them as well as his willingness to be accursed from Christ for their salvation (Romans 9:3). Acts portrays the ministry of a man who lived out in its fullest sense “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” Moreover, Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. For the most part, Gentiles heard him gladly in almost every city he visited. Most of the afflictions he endured came at the hands of reprobate Jews who were determined to discredit the message and destroy the messenger. The elect nation of Israel, in all likelihood, is what Paul had in mind. Timothy would have no doubt connected the dots.

A second possibility is the Church. Members of that body are “in Christ” the Elect One. The context provides support for this view as well. In 2:2, Paul told Timothy to teach faithful men what he had learned, who would be able to teach others. Since Timothy was pastor of the church at Ephesus,

these men would have been members of his church. A dozen verses later (2:14), Paul reiterates to Timothy his obligation to the people. He is to put THEM in remembrance of the “eternal glory” of their salvation (2:11-13), charging THEM to avoid strife about profitless words. Since 2:2 and 2:14 both refer to believers, why not interpret the elect of 2:10 as believers? In that case, the “salvation” is a “glory to glory” sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18) with “eternal” rewards.

The elect ones of 2:10 could be understood to be inclusive of both Israel and the Church without doing violence to the context. Paul endured a myriad of hardships on behalf of both elect groups. What the context does NOT support is identifying the elect of 2:10 as a group of yet-to-be-justified sinners and proof text for unconditional election. However, if “salvation” in 2:10 is seen as a reference to justification, Paul no doubt had God’s chosen people Israel in mind. The fact is believers are elected “in Christ” to inherit everything. Lost men are elected to absolutely nothing! The Jew is elected by virtue of physical birth; the believer by virtue of spiritual birth.

There is no endurance so valuable as that which translates into the salvation of sinners and sanctification of the saints. May the Lord enable each of us to put ourselves in the shoes of the protégé, rally around the legacy of endurance that Paul the mentor left for us, and then go and do likewise!