

Spiritual Endurance

Our Spiritual Race

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It is often called the greatest test of endurance on earth. In order to just complete, one must cover over 2,100 miles unassisted in a continuous three week period. That is roughly the distance between Charlotte and Salt Lake City, Utah. They must endure 21 stages of up to 144 miles a day with inclines that even cars struggle to get up in first gear. The 21 stages are broken down into two primary types—road stages and time trial stages. The road stages comprise long drawn-out endurance tests through rugged terrain. Alternatively, the time trials are shorter, more intense endurance tests where riders race against the clock at top speed over relatively flat lands. It is a battle of mind over body that begs each athlete to stop every moment of every day. It is a grueling event. And, in order to win one must complete the entire race in the shortest time. It is a select few who compete, and even finish, The Tour de France. There are but a handful of “super-humans” who actually win it.

But many would be surprised to learn that the greatest test of endurance on earth is not completed on a bicycle, nor on foot. It is a test of endurance that we, as God’s called, must pass. It may not be as physical, but overall it is more difficult and more grueling than The Tour de France, the 30 mile Manhattan Island Swim, and The Boston Marathon combined.

In Matthew 24, verse 13, Jesus Christ said plainly,

Matthew 24:13 “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

We live in a world of endless trials, and the key to developing spiritual endurance is understanding, expecting that our life here on earth is in fact many smaller trials or stages intertwined into one big trial that builds and tests our endurance—our faith in the Almighty God.

As Christians in God's church, we know the purpose of life on earth is to train and build a more godly character. Moreover, we understand that much like The Tour de France, we experience multiple stages—multiple trials of varying lengths and varying intensities.

That said, we have all experienced times of severe trial when we lost focus, became faint-hearted, and for at least a moment we lost our endurance. And none of us look forward to trials, nor can we deny the feeling of relief when the trial is over. In fact, there is nothing like the feeling when we have made it through a tough situation, when we have endured, when the sense of joy and well-being are once again restored. But more often than not, just as one trial ends, another begins.

Turn with me, please, to Hebrews 10.

Hebrews 10:36-38 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him."

In John Ritenbaugh's sermon "Faith (Part Two)" John begins with this verse and points out the source in Habakkuk 2:3-4. Quoting John's transcript:

Terrible times, God says, are coming and the proud are going to be caught in that time. If you want to live—if you want to be spared, if you want to be saved, if you want to be able to witness these things and live beyond it, and I am thinking here of eternal life—then you are going to live by your faith, and as we just saw, wait for it. It is going to require perseverance. It is going to require endurance.

Endurance is defined as, "the act, quality, or power of withstanding hardship or stress; the state or fact of persevering, and continued existence duration." Common synonyms for endurance include: courage; forbearance, fortitude, heart, long suffering, patience, perseverance, persistence, stamina, submission, sufferance, tenacity, vitality. That is quite a list.

So to endure means to remain without fleeing; to stand our ground; to withstand through affliction. There are various examples of remarkable endurance in the Bible, but perhaps we can learn more from one great man who failed the endurance test. With God he won many battles, but ultimately he lost focus, and for at least a moment was overcome with a lack of spiritual endurance.

Moses was much like many of us before his calling in that he was naturally impatient. But God saw something in Moses, and God blessed him with wisdom and humility to the point where God overcame his carnal mind. We know this because God spoke of Moses as the meekest man on the face of the earth. We can only imagine the frustrations that Moses endured, having put up with a stiff-necked, fainthearted people for 40 years. It was, after all, Israel's lack of spiritual endurance which caused them to wander for 40 years in the wilderness as God's purged those that lost their faith in Him.

Turn with me to Numbers 20:7 and as you turn there, I will give you some context, because we are picking up in the middle of a scripture. God tested, once again, the endurance of the Israelites. For 40 years God had provided the Israelites all the water they needed out of a rock, and as a test of spiritual endurance God stopped the water just before they were going into the Promised Land. He wanted to see what they have learned over the last 40 years. And sure enough, once again they failed the test of endurance. They murmured and complained.

Numbers 20:7-11 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals." So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.

Here is where Moses sinned. He became weary with the continual murmuring of the people against him and against God. His spiritual endurance gave out, and he became impatient. While Moses told the truth, the people were indeed rebels; it was spoken with impatience. And his anger is even more evident when he struck the rock twice. God did not tell him to strike the rock at all!

And reading on then in verse 12, God rebukes Moses and Aaron, stating,

Numbers 20:12 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Moses' lack of patience, his momentary lack of spiritual endurance and faith in God was his failure. No matter how long we have been a Christian, no matter how many battles we have stood firm for truth and righteousness, if we are not properly trained and do not remain focused on God, we too will fail. We will not endure the test of faith. We will not reach our finish line in the Kingdom of God.

Most modern-day Christians think it is excusable to give in from time to time while under extreme pressure or trial. Through the story of Moses it is painfully obvious that losing focus and a lack of spiritual faithful endurance, even for a moment, is neither acceptable nor excusable to our Almighty God.

So we may ask ourselves, "How can we possibly endure when one of the greatest men of all time failed the spiritual endurance test?" The answer is we must train and build our endurance, and with it our ability to always rely upon God's strength—His unwavering faithfulness.

Satan is cunning. He is clever. He attacks us at our weak points. But we need not be overcome, however severe or unexpected, to trial. God is faithful and He has promised in Isaiah 43:2 that He will be with us throughout all of our trials. Later, in I Corinthians 10:13, God also promises that no trial will be more than we can bear if we turn to Him. This is very comforting, but before we get too comfortable and complacent, this does not remove our

responsibility to train for the race, to do our part in building spiritual endurance.

Without a doubt, our best illustration of endurance through severe trial is that of our Savior Jesus Christ. He endured all things for our benefit by remaining focused on fulfilling His role and on the finish line. He could vividly see the future, the vision of joy that was set before Him.

So what was the vision, what was the joy that He remained focused on? He thought about the joy that He would have once He crossed the finish line and He won the race. He meditated and concentrated on this joy. He trained diligently for the race through fasting, through meditation, through daily prayer with His Father.

What was the joy that Christ focused on? We find the answer in Isaiah 65.

Isaiah 65:19 “I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying.”

His focus was on, “the joy of My people.” His focus, while being tormented and severely tortured, was on us, His chosen people.

Are we prepared to endure? I will not turn there for the sake of time, but in II Timothy 2:3-13, Paul reminds us that he who endures with Him will reign with Him.

We live in the end time when Satan's grip on the world is tightening. He realizes his reign is coming to an end, and he is becoming desperate to make the most of it.

The world hated Christ. And like Christ, if we stand for truth and righteousness, the world will hate us. We were forewarned of the times to come in Mark 13:12-13, where Mark speaks about betrayal in the end time. Mark states, “He who endures to the end shall be saved.”

We have yet to endure anything near the extent of what Christ endured, and God-willing, we never will. But living in the end time, we know that

persecution and more intense trials are just around the corner. Therefore, we must work on our spiritual endurance—our faith—so that we are prepared to make a fitting witness to glorify God.

You can jot down in your notes Matthew 12:20-21.

Are we prepared to win the race? Much like physical endurance, spiritual endurance requires training, focus, and faith in God. Think about how many people have ever completed, much less won a marathon, or a Tour de France without intense focus, and months if not years of vigorous training.

Just like an athlete in a race, our spiritual endurance must be built up over time through intense training. And just like the unprepared, the untrained athlete in a race, if we do not prepare, if we do not train, we will not endure. We will not finish the race.

Our training exercises are prayer, study, and meditation. Our training gym is the church. Our trainers are the ministry and our Almighty God. Our weights are our trials, and our training course is our life.

Turn with me to Hebrews 12, verses 1 through 4 as we bring this to a close.

Hebrews 12:1-4 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 and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

We can learn a lot from this scripture, and a quick study into spiritual endurance.

Let us recap:

1. Our life is a race of spiritual endurance, and if we are not moving forward, we are falling behind.
2. As children of God, we must expect trials and persecution in varying stages of intensity and duration throughout our life.
3. We must do our part to train ourselves and build our spiritual endurance, our faith in God through daily prayer, study, and meditation.
4. We must stay focused on the finish line, our one true purpose, and put aside anything that hinders us from enduring.
5. We should always remember that God has promised to be with us and that no trial will be more than we can bear.
6. We should remember those that have gone before us. Hebrews 11.
7. We must look to the one who has already run the race, endured, and won for our behalf.

We are chosen honored participants in the greatest race, the greatest endurance test of all time, a race to become part of the God Family.

So let us—through prayer, through study, through meditation, through fasting—increase our spiritual endurance, our faith in Almighty God, for it is through Him and with Him that we are able to endure all things.