

“Prepared to Endure”

Today I want to talk about a character trait, a virtue, that’s valuable and important, but often overlooked. It will help make us a better person. It will equip us to better handle the difficult periods of life. What am I talking about? *Endurance. (Perseverance. Fortitude).*

I was a Christian, and a pastor, for a number of years before I came to identify and appreciate this character trait called “endurance.” In one of the churches I served there was a man in the congregation who had a severe condition of diabetes, a disease he had suffered from childhood. It caused him all sorts of health issues and a deteriorating quality of life. He had been blind for years. He had serious heart problems. Yet he outdistanced most people with his faith. He and his wife and son formed a trio that sang gospel music. He became a Certified Lay Disciple in the United Methodist Church. He visited people in the local nursing home and preached there. He visited shut-ins in the congregation with me. He preached at the church sometimes when I was on vacation. He died in his fifties, at a relatively young age. *As I thought about what to say at his funeral, it struck me that here was man who excelled in endurance!* He prayed for physically healing, but it never came. But he *endured*. He lived with disabilities and failing health, yet he made the best of it. He shined as a Christian!

Sometimes in life we are called to endure! There are periods when we want things to be different and get better, but it doesn’t happen. And there’s nothing we can do to change things. God’s word to us might just be: *Endure! Persevere!*

You’ve experienced this kind of situation, haven’t you? You’re unemployed, and in spite of sending out resumes and following leads, nobody wants to hire you. You are left to care for a family member with who is chronically ill, or has Alzheimer’s disease, and the days drag on. You have a stretch where everything seems to go wrong – the car breaks down, your washing machine dies, the air conditioning isn’t working – one thing after another, no let up. You’re frustrated. You’re tired. You just want some relief.

How many millions of people have been dealing with this over the last 2-3 months. We’ve been on lockdown. Just about every aspect of life has been altered, curtailed. It seems like a bad dream. We feel impatient and hemmed in. The last few months have been a huge test for how prepared we are to *endure* a situation we detest.

Here’s the key question: When we go through these times, how do we respond? Do we just “put up with it”? Moan and groan and complain? Or can we have a more positive attitude, and even see good in it?

The Bible talks about this quality of *endurance*. Let’s look at several Scriptures. We have these words in Colossians: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from (God’s) glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Colossians 1:9-12). In this section of Scripture the Apostle Paul has said he’s praying that these first century Christians will grow spiritually, and live a life pleasing to the Lord, and that they can experience God’s power so they can be ***“prepared to endure everything”***.

Is there a way of preparing in advance for times when we're forced to endure? We may not realize it, but we all are subject to tests of endurance every day, every week, every month of our life! Someone has figured out that in an average lifetime we will spend at least 5 years waiting in lines and 2 years just trying to get in touch with people by telephone (now, by email or text). We spend 8 months of our life opening up junk mail, and 6 months sitting at traffic lights waiting for them to turn green! We may be more fit for endurance than we imagined!

Well, I'm not sure how accurate these facts are, but in a more serious vein, one obvious way of preparing is simply to realize that *times of hardship and difficulty are going to come*. It's a part of life. It doesn't matter who you are, how good or bad you are, whether you're a person of faith or not. Jesus said, "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). What could be more plain than that! And, by the way, He was talking to His *followers*.

Don't act surprised that extended periods in life come that shut you down for a while! Notice, Paul prayed that they would be *filled with God's power* so they could endure. Most of us at some point are going to need some divine help if we are going to endure with a positive spirit!

The Scripture text in Colossians says, "May you be prepared to endure everything *with patience*." Patience! That's hard, isn't it! "I want this to be over. C'mon, speed it up!" But life doesn't arrange itself around our demand to hurry things up. So can we quit complaining? Quit obsessing. And be patient!

Then in Colossians 1 it says, "While joyfully *giving thanks*." One of the hardest things to do when we're going through a long, drawn out period we don't like is to focus on things to be thankful for – to thank and praise God!

During this period of lockdown I read a book about a young lady born in North Korea. The title of the book is *In Order To Live*. She describes the oppression living under a dictatorship. Hardly any food. Constant brainwashing, every day, day and night. Denial of human rights. Any opposition to government can put you and your family in a forced labor camp, where you may or may not ever come out, or have you executed. Even to inquire about leaving the country puts you under surveillance. Eventually she escapes to China with her mother, only to be sold for slave marriages. Eventually, she finds freedom in South Korea – but what she has to go through is beyond description. I thought, "As bad as our situation is here with the coronavirus, as flawed as our country is, we are so blessed."

How do you prepare ahead of time to "joyfully give thanks" in tough situations where you can't change things? By joyfully giving thanks *every day*! Like it says in Psalm 34:1 "I will bless the Lord *at all times*; his praise shall *continually* be in my mouth!"

Here's another Scripture that talks about *endurance*. It's from the 5th chapter of the Book of Romans. "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not

disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

Notice the progression: “**suffering produces endurance**”. The Greek word translated “endurance” is *hupomone*. It does not mean sitting down and passively bearing things, letting the tide of events just flow over you. It suggests the ability to bear things and *turn them into something good, to deal triumphantly with anything life can do to us!* A lady named Jeanne Boggs from Fairless Hills, PA wrote to one of those advice columns in the newspaper with this question: “Can you tell me how a person who has a hard time walking without pain can dance and enjoy it? I do feel it for the next few days afterward, but as I normally limp around anyway, I just go ahead. When I hear good music, I can’t sit still. What’s the name for a thing like that?” The columnist’s answer? “It’s ‘a good attitude’, Jeanne. Congratulations.” So, thank God for hard times, because suffering can produce endurance – *a resilient, conquering spirit!*

Then it says, “**endurance produces character**”. It’s times of hardship and suffering that can birth new courage and heroism in us. The Greek word for “character” is *dokime* – a word used of metal that has been passed through fire so that everything base is purged out of it. John Maxwell tells how he once heard a silversmith talk about refining silver. The silversmith said, “I must sit with my eyes steadily fixed on the furnace; for if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured. I never take my eye off the silver in the furnace. If I take it out too early, it won’t be purified. If I leave it in too late, it will be injured. When the silver is in the fire, I focus. I don’t let anything distract me. I watch that silver carefully, waiting for the right moment to take it out.” John asked, “When is the right moment?” The silversmith said, I know the silver is pure when I can see my face reflected there.”

John Maxwell drew a lesson from that. He writes, “When I’m in a storm, as soon as the storm comes, I’m saying, ‘OK God, bail me out. Find me. Rescue me.’ Sometimes He doesn’t rescue me. He doesn’t come. But He is the great silversmith. While I’m in the furnace, He focuses and watches. His job isn’t a quick rescue mission. His job is to purify. He holds me until the right moment, and then He comes – never too early, never too late – right on time.”

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Suffering produces endurance...endurance produces character...and then the Scripture says, **character produces hope**. What does this mean? Here’s what I think. People who’ve been through tough times often see how uncertain and insecure the things of this life really are. Things we depended on, things we saved for or worked for, can be quickly gone. I’m not first one to say it, but many of us have been reminded through this coronavirus event how fragile life can be. We can lose jobs, we can have businesses that we’ve worked years to build up crash in a moment. We see a chunk of our lifelong investments lost in the stock market.

If we put all our hopes in these things, we can be sorely disappointed and devastated. But we

can hope in *God*, and the *promises of God*, that transcend the physical side of life. When we know God, and have a relationship with God through trusting His Son Jesus, we can realize that even if we lose everything, we still have the most important thing: we still God, and a relationship with our Creator that will last forever.

There you have it, this human character trait, called “endurance”. When stuck in situations in life we don’t want and don’t like, instead of whining and complaining or fretting or giving up, we can allow these situations to shape us into more patient, grateful, courageous people, who base our hopes on the goodness and faithfulness of God.

It was World War II, and England’s nightmare. The German army was taking over Europe, and Britain was being bombed regularly as armies advanced towards them. During this extreme crisis Winston Churchill addressed the people of England with these words: “Never, never, never, never, never, never give up! This could be our finest hour!”

May it be so for us.

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
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