

Whose Endurance?
The Call to Rebuild, Part III

Pentecost 25

November 14, 2010

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11 “I and my family have sinned...Grant success to your servant.”

ISAIAH 65:17-25 “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.”

LUKE 21:5-19 “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

It was getting really rough.

I was in the middle of a long, plodding, seemingly interminable hill. Where was the entrance to Central Park? I was looking for it but it seemed to take a giant step backward, the hill stretching up and up in front of me, a sea of other runners' heads bobbing up and down endlessly. I plodded on. It was going on forever. My feet were shuffling, my shoulders sagging, my head drooping. My breath was ragged and the pain in my legs was too great to ignore.

The right hand turn into the park came just before the 24th mile marker. But by that time I was ready to quit. How could I have run so far and so well only to arrive here, with this feeling from deep inside that I had had enough?

I know a little bit about endurance from racing the marathon. I know it takes a fair amount of practice, building up your strength and stamina over a long period of time—in this case, six months. I know it requires both mental concentration as well as physical ability. I know that good technology in shoes, clothing, and even the food you eat can help. I know that above all else, the will and motivation to succeed must be present.

So what happened? If I knew all of that, what was my problem?

Luke 21:19 (our Gospel lesson today) says, “By your *endurance* you will gain your souls.” You may be familiar with another verse from Hebrews (chapter 12): “Let us run with *endurance* [or perseverance] the race marked out for us.” Both use the greek word *hupomone*, “endurance,” which means the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty. But, the question is, what happens when you don't have any? What if your endurance simply runs out?

What happens if, like I did, you run out of gas, and all the training, all the strategies, all the technologies, all the effort in the world don't quite carry you the whole distance? What happens when, more to the point, you run out spiritually? What do you do then?

You've been there, I know. When everything you have to give has already been given, and there is nothing more. When the love supply has run out. When the compassion fatigue has set in and you can't bear one more request, one more problem, one more task. You simply cannot handle one more office complaint, or manage one more child's emotional drama, or deal with one more of your spouse's bad habits.

I've had bad days where I say, "I can't take another step! I just can't do this anymore!" Have you had those days? How about those years? Sometimes we run to the end ourselves and our ability to handle things. This is a crisis of endurance. Because if we quit, what happens? What happens to those who rely on us, to our jobs, our families, our houses? What happens to our bodies if we stop taking care of them? In short, what happens to our whole life?

We run out of alternatives. A Wallflowers song says, "Too late to quit, too soon to go home." That's a hellish spot to be in. Exhausted, out of endurance, but with no escape, no hope of an end.

There was once a bartender (this is not a joke line!) whose hometown was destroyed, and whose entire way of life had been taken away from him. After being forced to live in a foreign country for many years, he undertook the arduous task of journeying back to the desolate place that had once been home.

The man was a simple layman. Since he was a bartender by trade, he was used to late nights and hard work. But when he actually saw how bad things were, he came to the end of himself. He knew no effort of his would solve it. He sat down and cried.

The bartender's name was Nehemiah. He lived during the time when Israel came home from a 70-year exile away from Jerusalem. Their home had been razed, wiped out. They were facing a mammoth rebuilding project and everyone's endurance had run out. So Nehemiah sat down and cried. And then he did something else. He prayed to God and owned up to the real problem: "I and my family have sinned." (Remarkably, he repents for his whole house.) He recognized that the first step was to acknowledge that he was not right with

God in his heart. He then asked God to be the one to bring success in rebuilding his home.

The bartender's repentance recalls for us the pattern of reject, repent, reform, rebuild. When we reject God he says, "You shall die," as he did to Adam. That's another way of saying, your endurance will eventually run out. Adam did not die immediately. Death has a way of working backwards. It seeps into our lives, even now sapping our endurance.

Death is something only God can fix. Only the work of a loving God can bring us to turn around and repent. After that, again only God can come in and reform and reshape our hearts, the foundation for endurance.

So often we think that it is our work, our will, our endurance, that will fix things, make the difference in the end. "Try harder" becomes the mantra. Our culture and popular media reinforce this at every turn. We are encouraged with slogans about motivation, commitment, technique. At the best of times we may even be inspired to be more moral, rational, or ethical. But none of it will work in the end if we have turned from God. "Try harder" is like repairing a sinking ship with toothpicks. Our works, our ways, our opinions, our egos, they are the toothpicks, and the ship is going down. The bartender recognized it. Do we?

Contrast Paul's talk of endurance in Romans (chapter 5): "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." *In which we now stand!* What a miracle! The ship has already been repaired! God doesn't need our toothpicks. He is already sailing a strong robust vessel.

Paul goes on, "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that *suffering produces endurance*." Because we already stand in God's grace, something can come of suffering—namely, endurance! God can make the most senseless, meaningless suffering into something good. Endurance, which produces character and hope, is there already, and God grants it to us through the very suffering we are enduring.

So what do we do when we run out of endurance? Another way of asking the question is: *Whose* endurance do we need? Like Nehemiah, Paul realized whose endurance we really need when we reach the end of ours: God's.

One of the best things about the New York City Marathon is the fans. Every time I felt like I was in a slump, I would wave to the crowd along the side, and they would go wild. They gave me back some of their energy, some of their endurance. In the same way, Jesus gives you his eternal, golden energy—his own life! His vitality, his body and blood will reinvigorate you for the journey and replenish your endurance.

Jesus told his disciples (in John 15): *Abide in me, for apart from me, you can do nothing.* Nothing? Yes, nothing! Not running a marathon, not rebuilding Jerusalem, not helping the poor, not curing cancer, not saving the church, not even getting up in the morning or going to sleep at night. There was a bartender who realized that. Have we?

So there I was, at the entrance to the park and the final miles, shocked at how hard a time I was having, trying unsuccessfully to prop myself up with the toothpicks of motivation. I knew a little something extra was coming up soon, however. I was looking up hopefully—then I saw it. A sign, in big orange letters, that said, “ED.” My family. I almost cried with relief. There they were, supporting me and lending me their love and energy. I was known and named, singled out of the thousands. Once again, I gained endurance as a gift, given from outside of me, this time in a very personal way by my family, and it kept me going until the end of the race.

It is truly life-changing when you are given endurance from outside of you. When you are grasped and loved by Jesus, something amazing happens: you are not only cheered by Him but *named* by Him, *known* by Him, *entered* by Him, *filled* by Him. He singles you out of the thousands and says, “My beloved Son.” This gives you endurance as His power flows into you and gives you renewed purpose, strength, and life.

When you are loved by Jesus, it seeps into the deepest recesses of your soul and provides nourishment to you there. When you are forgiven, it does not matter how many miles you have left to go, for you are powered by God’s own supernatural presence, and Christ’s own endurance.

Christ’s own Endurance! When the Gospel says, “*By your endurance you will gain your souls,*” (Luke 21:19) we should not understand this to mean “prop yourselves up with toothpicks of motivation.” Rather trust in the divine endurance you have been given through faith in Christ. Rely not your own natural endurance,

but Christ's endurance, given to you. He can say it is yours, because he has given it to you, so it belongs to you.

Dear friends in Christ, Paul's prayer for the church was this: "*May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's endurance.*" (2 Thess 3:5) When you get to the end of your rope, when you cannot do anything but sit down with the bartender and cry, when you have suffered all you can, remember the grace comes from Jesus Christ who says, "*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth!*" (Isaiah 65:17). By His endurance given to you, you will gain your souls.

Whose endurance? Whose work? Whose suffering? Whose name?

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. May God who loves you direct your hearts and minds into Jesus, and may His endurance be yours.

Amen.