

ENDURING Hebrews 12:1-12 September 17, 2023

A couple of mornings ago, I met my friend Dean for breakfast. When I asked him how he was doing, he said, "I'm enduring."

If his response does not sound remarkable, it is only because you do not know Dean and the awful howling spiritual storm that has raged in his soul over the past year or so; the relentless questions and doubts pressing in on him. He is wrestling with life. It began with a divorce and now he is soul searching. Dean is really struggling with God, doubts, work, health, anxiety, depression, addiction. It is not a pretty sight. Dean is truly wrestling and, as he says, enduring. He is enduring...and, to me, even that is remarkable.

When we observe people like my friend Dean enduring difficult struggles, we often feel the merciful caring impulse to try to relieve their anguish. It's a loving impulse and sometimes it is exactly what we should do. But we must be careful and discerning, because sometimes it is not helpful. We may be minimizing their pain, trying to rescue them. In fact, we might be trying to take away something important, even precious that the Lord is giving: endurance.

Yes, the Lord gives endurance. The New Testament makes it clear that, for the Christian, developing endurance is essential. The Bible tells us "the way is hard that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14) and fiery trials most certainly will befall us (I Peter 4:12). That's why the Bible says, "you have need of endurance" (Hebrews 10:36).

When God determines to give us the gift of endurance, it is one of the most precious, valuable, loving gifts we can receive from God. But how is endurance gained? You know the answer: pain. There is no way around it. Pain and suffering lead to endurance.

Let's talk about endurance. Endurance is more than bouncing back from the hard things that have happened. Sometimes we don't bounce back, we crawl back, we scream, we claw, we stumble back. It is not just about surviving, but about grabbing a rope and holding on.

I used to think that resilience, endurance, was this straightforward linear journey. That whole "pull yourself up boot strap" mentality and it seemed so simple. It was the power of the will and I had plenty of stubborn will power. But I have come to realize it is so much messier and difficult. The moment I think I've got things figured out and under control, that's when I always get knocked down.

It is difficult and it hurts when you get knocked down. Eventually it becomes less about willpower and more about trust. You never know how much you really believe in something until its truth or falsehood become a matter of life and death.

The Bible says God disciplines us out of love to teach us endurance. That is the message of our Scripture lesson from Hebrews today.

Now, God's discipline can be a confusing, disorienting experience. It certainly was for the original recipients of the letter to the Hebrews.

As a newly formed Christian congregation, they were suffering various forms of persecution and social alienation because of their faith in Christ. They were in a spiritual storm, constantly being pressed by persecution and hostility from the outside and their questions and doubts from the inside. They were growing weary and discouraged.

And here's where the author of the letter to the Hebrews exercised careful discernment in his response. As he listened to these Christians express their fatigue, he did not hear endurance like I heard from my friend Dean the other morning. No, the author of Hebrews heard the members of the congregation drifting away from the faith.

He heard them giving up confidence in Christ. They were beginning to shrink back in fearful unbelief. He heard them losing their faith, the same faith that had once given them such confidence and joy (Hebrews 10:34-35). They faced a clear and present danger. They surely needed encouragement. But this author knew they did not need the soft and easy consoling kind of encouragement. They needed a firm exhortation.

Therefore, the author of Hebrews, did not mince words. He warned them of the danger and said, “You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (Hebrews 10:36).

Then the writer of the letter to this Hebrew congregation encouraged them at length to faithfully endure just as the great saints of the past had done (chapter 11) and just as “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” had done (Hebrews 12:1-2).

And then he reminded them, in today’s Bible lesson, that their affliction was the painful package containing God’s loving gift of endurance, that their affliction held a promise.

The Hebrews (and us), God’s children in every age, need this reminder. That’s why the author pointed his Hebrew readers back to an ancient proverb, one they all knew, and asked, “Have you forgotten the old proverb that addresses you as God’s own children?” From the Book of Proverbs, chapter 3, he quoted: “Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, for the Lord disciplines the ones He loves.”

Wow... the Lord disciplines the ones he loves. Do you believe that? Can you see that being disciplined is really God’s love for you? We really must be the children of God because God treats us like a parent, loving us, certainly, but also disciplining us.

Why do you discipline a child? Not because you are a mean person but because you love the child, you care for the child. God disciplines us for our own good, that we may share in God’s holiness. There is a long-term purpose to any sort of discipline.

Let us understand our suffering as the endurance-building discipline of a loving God. Let us learn to even rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance. Hope is fed by our resolve to endure.

I am saying today, out of God’s love, we are disciplined to learn endurance. (It takes faith to make such a statement.)

That’s why when I get to heaven, I’m going straight to the information desk. I’ve got questions about suffering. I’m sure you do, too. Maybe we can meet up and ask our questions together.

Our Bible reading today reminds us: Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord; the Lord disciplines the ones He loves.

When my dear breakfast-time friend Dean expressed his own resolve to endure, I was given a glimpse of God giving him a precious gift in a painful package.

Please know that Dean does not regard lightly the discipline of God. He is receiving it as best he can with a humble faith. His trials grieve him deeply. But as he says, “I’m enduring, Bob. I’m enduring.” So, I try to encourage him.

May we all encourage one another, and not just encouragement with soft and sweet consolation, but also to urge and strengthen each other to continue in the faith since it is often through tribulations that we draw closer to God and come to understand God’s will for our lives.

In the middle of the howling storm of faith, in the dark night of the soul, in the agony of affliction, it is easy to grow weary and give up. It becomes a matter of life and death. By our endurance we will gain our lives. We will persevere. We will endure.