

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Those Who Endure

Hebrews 10:32-39

Earlier this week, Scott Gottlieb, former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, said that the United States is in the second inning of the coronavirus epidemic. The next day, I heard another expert say our country is in the third inning. Now I know we didn't progress one inning in one day. That would be big jump. These are just two opinions that fall into the same basic range. Either way, second inning or third inning, we're still early in the game, even after two months of staying at home and social distancing.

Many of us were anticipating a glimmer of hope around midweek when Maryland Governor Larry Hogan detailed phase one reopening plans for the state. His announcement included the lifting of some restrictions on religious organizations, within certain expectations and limitations. Hogan didn't use any baseball analogies, but I did note his statement that "We still have miles to go on this road, but we are all in it together and if we stay strong, Maryland Strong, we will get through this together."¹

On the same day, Mike Ryan, a top official at the World Health Organization, looking at the situation from an international perspective, emphasized that there's a "long, long way to go" before we reach a new normal. Ryan stressed the difficulty in predicting how long the coronavirus could keep circulating. As another WHO epidemiologist put it, "We need to get into the mindset that it is going to take some time to come out of this pandemic."²

Early innings. Miles to go. A long way to go. I'm sure there are many other images, comparisons, and expressions out there. Each person, in his or her own way, is trying to communicate the fact that endurance is one of the keys to making it through this situation and coming out on the other side. There has been a lot to endure so far, and there's more to come.

From the earliest days of the Christian faith, endurance has been an essential part of how followers of Jesus have responded to God's saving work in the world. God's gracious act in Christ was sufficient to deal with the human condition of sin, but the consummation of that work, when Christ comes again and God brings his people into a better home, a heavenly city, takes time and requires perseverance. The will of God isn't accomplished in the blink of an eye. So one of the marks of authentic faith is endurance.

Endurance is one of the top priorities in the book of Hebrews. When the writer of Hebrews looks at the congregation, he recalls how committed, hard working, generous, and caring they had been in the past, especially during very difficult circumstances. But now, some members of the fellowship have grown lax in their attendance at the community's assemblies. Commitment is waning. A past full of love and good works is giving way to a present devoid of energy and enthusiasm.

Why? We don't know for sure. It could be a combination of factors. The delay in the return of Christ may have had a demoralizing effect in the community. Perhaps some in

this fellowship of Jewish Christians were feeling drawn back into the life of Judaism, with its long-standing traditions, as well as some government protection from persecution. We do know that this community of believers had been under extreme external pressure. Some of its members had been imprisoned. Some had had their property confiscated. Many had suffered public abuse and ridicule. They had endured shame for being followers of Jesus, who himself had endured the shame of the cross.

Preacher Thomas Long tries to capture the mood in this community of Christians. He says:

They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.³

In today's text, the writer meets the congregation where they are in time, and then starts taking them back in time. Back to when they first heard the gospel and came to faith in Christ. Not because those days were easier and rosier, but because memory can be a means of infusing strength and courage into faith that has grown weak and fearful. Again, these were not recollections of the "good times." They were memories of verbal and physical abuse, and other forms of mistreatment. But looking back, the congregation can see that it didn't collapse under the pressure. Instead, it responded to hardship with compassion and joy.

To drive his point home, the writer borrows an image from the world of sports. He says, "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering" (v. 32). The phrase "a great conflict full of suffering" is an athletic metaphor that can be more literally translated, "you endured a contest of suffering." As one commentator has reminded us, the writer takes the congregation's experience of suffering and helps them see it through the lens of faith. Viewed in this way, their suffering wasn't just a case of persecution and pain. It was more like "an Olympic time trial."⁴ Their endurance wasn't just about sticking it out when things got hard. It was about how their faith was going through strengthening and conditioning.

A few years ago, a 12-year-old named LeeAdianez Rodriguez-Espada was running late to a 5k event in Rochester, New York. To save some time, her mom dropped her off near the starting line before parking the car. When she got to the starting line, LeeAdianez realized the race had already begun, so she just started running and fell into pace with the others. By the time she reached mile 4, she realized that the finish line was nowhere in sight. She turned to another runner and asked how much further. That's when it struck her that she was in the half marathon (just over 13 miles) instead of the 5k (just over 3 miles).

Meanwhile, LeeAdianez's mother, who had found a spot at the 5k finish line, alerted race officials when her daughter never arrived. A police officer eventually found her on the marathon course. She said she knew her family would be worried, but she couldn't quit. She needed to finish the race. She placed 1,885 out of 2,111 runners.⁵

In today's text, maybe there were some folks in the congregation who hadn't anticipated such a long race when they signed up to follow Jesus. What they thought was going to be a short, leisurely run has turned into a marathon. But the writer reminds them that finishing the course, a route that Christ himself has already completed, has been, is, and will be, a

costly path. When they look back at the early stages of the race, they can hopefully see more clearly that the hardship they suffered was training their faith and equipping them with some of the stamina they need both now and going forward.

During this time when our congregation has been scattered and unable to gather in person, God has provided us with many things to sustain us and move us forward. He has given us his Word through daily devotions, online Bible studies, and the weekly sermon via our church website. He has given us prayer, music, and various forms of electronic fellowship and congregational communication. He has given us opportunities to serve through acts of compassion and deeds of mercy, both within and beyond our church.

What's more, God has blessed us with the gift of memory. Most of all, the continual recalling of how Christ offered himself to redeem us, to make us God's people, and to give us a future in the fullness of God's kingdom. And within that story of God's saving action, we have all the memories of our life together as a family of believers. Memories of Sunday mornings, learning in the Sunday School classroom and worshiping together in the sanctuary. Memories of hugs, handshakes, and warm conversation in the church vestibule. Memories of eating together at the monthly potluck. Memories of food drives, fundraisers, backpack projects, and other forms of serving the community. Memories of boys and girls and their families coming and going each day from our day care ministry.

And not just the memories of the good times. Also the memories of the hard times. Memories of challenges our congregation has faced across the years. Times when resources were running low. Times when there was disagreement and division in the fellowship. Times when a ministry initiative didn't get off the ground. Times when long-term programs weren't bearing fruit anymore. Times when it was hard to get the needed volunteers. Times when leadership was lacking or faltering. Times when it was hard to see the way forward.

And yet, in all these times, good, bad, and in between, God has been present in faithfulness and mercy. God has been working with enduring love. God has been guiding us through wilderness wanderings and keeping us on the route that leads to the fullness of his reign, when Christ comes again to finish what God has started. No wonder the writer of Hebrews says, "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded" (v. 35).

Theologian William Barclay once noted, "Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory." Right now, you and millions of other people are bearing a hard thing. Moment by moment, day by day, the coronavirus pandemic presses upon us and wears at us. Some of its effects are tangible and visible, while others are more unseen or unrecognized. But just as the impact is real, so is God's power to take what's hard and work through it for purposes of eternal glory. One of the ways God does that is by using trials and tribulations to train our trust and form our faith.

Like so many other parts of our society, sports has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. Leagues from the NBA all the way down to local soccer associations have paused or cancelled their seasons. Some professional and collegiate sports organizations are exploring the possibility of having athletes play, but in empty stadiums and arenas. At least that way, fans can watch the games on television. But what a strange experience it will be for the athletes to compete, yet not have the sound of cheering fans surrounding them.

In today's text, the writer brings in some shouts of encouragement from the stands, in the form of quotations from Habakkuk and Isaiah. These voices cheer God's people on as they run the race that leads to an eternal prize. In the next chapter of Hebrews, the writer starts

naming some of these models of perseverance and endurance. Faithful ones such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and so on. Then chapter 12 opens by saying that for us who are still on the track, the stands are not empty. On the contrary, the stadium is packed. We're surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses," row after row of the faithful who have already completed the course. And now, they're urging us on, exhorting us to push harder toward the finish line.

Craig Brian Larson tells about a scene that unfolded at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. A runner from Ethiopia had already won the marathon, looking as strong and vigorous as when he started. Over an hour later, as the last few thousand spectators were preparing to leave, they heard police sirens and whistles through the gate entering the stadium. Larson says,

The attention turned to that gate. A sole figure, wearing the colors of Tanzania, came limping into the stadium. His name was John Steven Akhwari. He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. His leg was bandaged, bloody. He had taken a bad fall early in the race. Now, it was all he could do to limp his way around the track. The crowd stood and applauded as he completed that last lap.

When he finally crossed the finish line, one man dared ask the question all were wondering. "You are badly injured. Why didn't you quit? Why didn't you give up?"

Akhwari, with quiet dignity said, "My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish."⁶

Brothers and sisters, times like the present put our endurance to the test. By the grace of God you began this race through faith in Christ. And as you focus on Christ himself, who already holds the victor's prize, the grace of God will enable you to finish.

¹ Luke Broadwater and Pamela Wood, "Maryland Gov. Hogan Lifts Stay-At-Home Order, Allows Limited Retail to Resume." The Baltimore Sun website. May 13, 2020. Accessed May 13, 2020 <<https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/bs-md-pol-stay-at-home-20200513-lzdziyppfbrcybmanwqard4tp5u-story.html>>.

² Emma Farge and Michael Shields, "'This Virus May Never Go Away', WHO Says." Reuters website. May 13, 2020. Accessed May 13, 2020 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-briefing-idUSKBN22P2IJ>>.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 3.

⁴ Long, *Hebrews*, n.p.

⁵ AnneClaire Stapleton, "Girl, 12, Accidentally Runs Half Marathon." CNN website. April 27, 2016. Accessed May 14, 2020 <<https://www.cnn.com/2016/04/27/health/12-year-old-accidentally-runs-half-marathon/index.html>>.

⁶ Craig Brian Larson, "Strong to the Finish," Preaching Today, Tape No. 155.