

## **“Character Tour: Endurance”**

Looking back over the course of your life, what is it that you regret having quit? Maybe it's an educational or business opportunity. Maybe you feel like you quit on a friend or a spouse. Maybe you feel like you have given up on God. Scroll back through your life and just think about those times, those instances where you stopped something. Think about the feelings of remorse and regret. We all have them. When I scroll back through my life, I can think about several situations.

I gave up on music lessons, sports, hobbies, if things got too hard, I bailed. And I regret a lot of that.

We all know that we live in culture where we demand immediate results. One problem with that is when we don't get immediate results, lots of us just bail out. Way too many of us would rather bail out than blast through. A lot of people would rather leave than last. Some would rather throw in the towel than stay in the game. A lot of people have that job-quitting, vow-forgetting, excuse-making, work-faking mentality that runs from the character quality that I am going to talk to you about over the next several minutes.

We talked about discipline in our last session. We looked at Daniel because Daniel went deep with discipline. We defined character as something inward. We said character is an outward reflection of an inward connection. We talked about how discipline is important to all the other character qualities we can have. It's great to have discipline. I'm happy that we have it. But today's quality is something that discipline must be welded onto. It's endurance. That's what I want to talk to you about today — endurance.

What is endurance? Endurance is definitely on the endangered character quality list, wouldn't you say? Endurance is stampeding through those stopping points of life. It's packing the power of perseverance. It's a quality that we desperately need. But again, from month to month apartment leases, to escape clauses in contracts, and from prenuptial agreements in marriage to free agency in athletics, our culture promotes a lack of endurance. It's almost like, “Oh, you are a quitter? Good for you. You take the easy way out? Good for you. That's great. That's American. That's what you should do.”

The Bible comes along and tells us that we are to have endurance, that we are to have the ability from God to stampede through those stopping points, to pack the power of perseverance.

Today, we are going to look at a guy who was really empowered with endurance. This is a guy that you may not have heard about. I'm talking about Nehemiah. Nehemiah is one of our spiritual ancestors. He was a Jew but didn't live in the Jewish nation. Like Daniel who we talked about last week, Nehemiah was a captive. Daniel was captive to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, he destroyed the place. He burned the homes, tore down the temple and destroyed the walls around the city. That's what a ruler did when he wanted to wipe a city off the map. Because back then if a city didn't have a wall, it was unprotected, easy to assault, and not worth living in. It was destined to become a ghost town. That's the way Nebuchadnezzar left Jerusalem, destroyed and with only a few residents left.

Later, the Persians conquered the Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians and a new empire took control. This new empire allowed some of the Jews to return to their homeland and begin reconstruction. But the job was huge. It was overwhelming. And word got back to this man, Nehemiah that J-town was in sad shape, that the surrounding nations were dissing the God of the Bible, and God's people. They were making cracks like, “Your God must not be somebody if he let this happen. Where is your God? Did he wander off somewhere? Did he forget about you? Isn't the truth that your God isn't real after all?”

Nehemiah hears about the state of things in J-town and something stirs deep inside of him. Look at this passage, [SLIDE...] **“They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:3-4, NIV).** He feels a leading to do something, to go back, to rebuild the city of his ancestors, the city where his fore-fathers are buried. The city where God’s promises are rooted. The city from which the world will be blessed. So what does Nehemiah do. He packs up, goes to J-town and fixes the walls! No. No. No. Slow down Tex. It’s not that easy.

This is where Nehemiah has to show his true character. This is where we see endurance. You see, Nehemiah couldn’t just pack up and go because he was a slave. Now don’t misunderstand. Just because he was a slave doesn’t mean that he was a nobody. Nehemiah was the king’s cup-bearer. What is that?! Well, it’s literally what it says. It was his job to carry wine to the king. It was his job to taste the wine to make sure it was of kingly quality. But most important it was his job to taste the wine, to make sure it wasn’t poisoned. Cupbearers in that day weren’t just waiters and poison-testers. They obviously had to be very trusted. Nehemiah was always close to the king. He would have been a close advisor and confidant. Even though he was a slave Nehemiah was powerful and influential...but he was still a slave and he had to go through a great deal to accomplish his goal, endurance was critical.

This is where we begin to see Nehemiah’s endurance and this is where we can learn some things relevant for today from this ancient story.

First, what did Nehemiah do, he responded the right way. [SLIDE: **“Elements of Endurance: Respond the right way”**] When Nehemiah heard the news about Jerusalem, he could have responded a lot of different ways. He could have said, “Not my problem. I may be Jewish, but I was born here in Persia, I never even lived in Jerusalem, I’ve got more important things to deal with.” He could have said that. But he didn’t. Notice what he did do. It says that he sat down and wept. He sat down, that means he’s thinking, he’s processing, he’s trying to get his brain around what he’s just heard. If we’re going to endure what we face, we do the same. We take the time to process the situation.

What is it that you have to blast through? A bad diagnosis from the doctor? A problem at work? A situation with the kids? Stop what you’re doing, sit down and get your brain around it. This is a huge part of endurance. Think.

But not only did Nehemiah get his brain around the problem, he got his heart around it. It says that he sat down and wept. He did not disconnect emotionally. He let his heart feel the pain. You see God gave us the ability to think and the ability to feel and together those two abilities can help us navigate through some tough stuff in life. Nehemiah’s response to the bad news, he sat down to think and engage emotionally.

The next thing that Nehemiah did that is key to endurance is to pray. **“Pray”**

**“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: ‘O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you’” (Nehemiah 1:4-6, NIV).**

Nehemiah prayed and his prayer is a great model of endurance praying. First he spent time doing it. He knew that this wasn’t going to be one of those arrow prayer kind of situations – a quickie prayer. No, this was going to take some time. Life situations that require endurance also require endurance prayers. You and I probably can’t take days away from the flow of life

and pray. But when we face an endurance situation, we can make extended times to pray, to talk to God, to listen, to learn.

Notice that in Nehemiah's prayers he remembers that God is a God of love. If you look at this whole prayer you see that he remembers God's promises of restoration, faithfulness, direction. And at the same time, Nehemiah spends time confessing. You see, the reason that Jerusalem was in ruins is because the people had turned their backs on God, on his promises, and on his direction. The consequence was that they were vulnerable to destruction and it hit.

Nehemiah knows this and he confesses, he gets honest with God. Why is this important? Because if we're going to face life situations with endurance, we've got to travel light. We can't be dragging around a bunch of unforgiven sin. Hebrews 12 says this, **[SLIDE...]** **"Let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).**

You want to endure, pray, and let your prayers be a way to remember God's promises, and to come clean with God.

One other thing here, Nehemiah fasted. I talked a little bit about this at the Ash Wednesday service. Going without food for a certain amount of time is a spiritual exercise. Nehemiah fasted to improve his relationship with God. Fasting helped him pray with more focus and clarity so he could better hear what God would have him do.

Fasting isn't a show, it's not some magic ritual, it's an act of worship that helps us center on God. Richard Foster writes, "More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately" (from *Celebration of Discipline*)

During this season of Lent, as we get ready for an awesome Easter, consider fasting. One meal a day, or one day a week, so that you can be more focused in prayer, more connected to God, see what surfaces in your life that you've been covering up. So Nehemiah prayed, it was a huge part of enduring.

The next thing Nehemiah did was seek resources. **[SLIDE: add to previous "Seek resources"]** Through his connection with God, he knew what he had to do, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And that meant he would have to get some resources. So first he talked to the king of Persia – the guy that Nehemiah served. And that was no small task. Nehemiah writes that he was afraid to approach the king and ask for time off and the resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The last message series was on fear. Nehemiah faced his fears of going to the king – the king could have beheaded him for any reason. The king allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem and even gave him what he needed to rebuild the walls.

But Nehemiah didn't just need wood and stone, he needed support. Why? Because later on he would face a bunch of bullies. Regional governors that would try to undermine his project time and time again. As Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls, they threatened him and the builders, they accused him of trying to make himself king. They did all kinds of things and Nehemiah would need to be resourced in order to face the bullies.

For you and me, if we're going to endure, we do the same thing. We find our resources. This will depend on what you're facing at the time. You may need to gather financial resources, or information, or connect with other people in helpful ways. Over the years I've talked to a lot of people who have faced the decline of a family member diagnosed with Alzheimer's. They're scared, they're unsure, they're heart-broken. To endure in the face of that, they're going to have to seek information, support, resources for many kinds. That's what Nehemiah did and it works.

Then, Nehemiah took action **[SLIDE: add to previous “Take action”]**. He began to lead the people in rebuilding the walls. And as they were rebuilding the threats poured in. Those regional governors, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Ashdodites all start undermining the whole thing like termites! Nehemiah has the builders work with their tools in one hand and a sword in the other. That’s action! That’s endurance!

All the while Nehemiah reminds them what they’re doing and why they may have to fight. **[SLIDE...] “After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (Nehemiah 4:14, NIV).**

Endurance means you take action and while you do you never forget why you’re doing it. You remind yourself over and over again. As you endure with your family through that difficult time, maybe with a child, or your spouse, you remember why it’s worth the fight. As you battle that cancer, you remember why it’s worth the fight. As you press through in that job situation, or search for a job, you remember why it’s worth the fight and you do not give up!

Throughout this Nehemiah showed another attribute of endurance, trust **[SLIDE: add to previous, “Trust God.”]** As they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and faced the bullies, and their own doubts, and weariness, Nehemiah made sure that ultimately their trust was not in their swords, or their work, or even their rebuilding. **[SLIDE...] “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!” (Nehemiah 4:20, NIV).**

Trusting God is huge. God has not promised to make life easy for us, but he has promise to guide us through life, to direct us, to give us peace and joy, to put an overcomer’s spirit inside of us. Our job is to trust him. To trust that in the midst of our endurance situations, no matter what the outcome, God is God, and God is good.

I recently did Larry Lair’s funeral. He was diagnosed with cancer and from day one his attitude was one of trust. He fought that cancer, he went through chemotherapy, he faced the bullies, he lived out endurance and all along he trusted. He said over and over, “No matter what happens it’s all good. If God heals me, that’s great, if he doesn’t, that’s fine too because my life is in his hands.” Trust.

Finally, another overachieving characteristic of endurance that Nehemiah shows is this **[SLIDE: add to previous “Pull together”]** Nehemiah knew he couldn’t rebuild the walls of Jerusalem alone. He put his heart into it and he rallied the people to give all they had to the effort. The people worked side by side, men, women and children. Sons and daughters, because one of the key things to enduring, to facing life, is doing it together.

Take a look at this video about a father and son team, Dick and Rick Hoyt. **[VIDEO: “Together (Team Hoyt)”]** Together Dick and Rick have done 85 marathons, 212 triathlons (including 8 Ironman Triathlons). Together. Last year they completed their 25<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon, after Dick had had knee surgery and a heart attack. Doctors told Dick that if he hadn’t been so active he would have died 15 years ago. Endurance.

God wants to move us from point A to point B. That’s what God wants. As we walk with God, we hear God, we obey God and we are going to hit quitting points. Quitting points relationally, maybe in a friendship or a marriage; quitting points financially; quitting points vocationally, maybe in a health situation. But God is ready and willing to equip us with amazing endurance.

I challenge you to become a strong finisher. Why should I be a strong finisher? I’ll tell you why. Because Jesus is the ultimate finisher and he is standing at the finish line. He says, “Look eyes with me.” Look at Hebrew 12:2, **[SLIDE...] “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author**

**and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of throne of God” (Hebrews 12:12).**

So Christ is saying, “Don’t look to the right. Don’t look to the left. Follow me. Look at me. I endured the cross for you. I had you on my mind when I was spilling my blood on Calvary. I will give you endurance. I will give you power.”

This is a character quality that you and I can live into, grow into, and be empowered by. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.