

## **“Endurance”**

Last week I talked about faith and perseverance. And how those two characteristics are crucial in times like this, how they're not a given, but that we need to work at them, be intentional about them. Today I want to talk about a related quality that's also crucial in times like these, the character quality of endurance. But listen, endurance isn't just critical in times like these, it's just as crucial in normal times. “Normal times.” What is normal anyway? My friend Mike Robinson says that normal is just a setting on the dryer.

Life is unpredictable. That's normal. Just when you think you've got a handle on life, the handle breaks off and spills hot coffee in your lap. That's normal. Just when you had a routine, that worked, a family schedule that kept you all sane, you get word that they've moved you to the night shift, or are transferring you to another city. That's normal. Storms are normal in life. Normal really is just a setting on a dryer. Normal for life, is unpredictable. And in the face of unpredictability, we bring the godly characteristic of endurance.

So what is it? **Endurance is stampeding through those stopping points of life.** And to get at this we are going to look at a guy who was really empowered with endurance. His name is Nehemiah. Nehemiah is one of our spiritual ancestors. He was a Jew but didn't live in the Jewish nation. In fact Nehemiah was a captive. You see a couple of generations before Nehemiah, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, conquered the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, and 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 around it, 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 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 Jerusalem, J-town, was in sad shape. Word got back to him that the surrounding nations were berating the God of the Bible, and God's people. They were making cracks like, “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, **“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).** Nehemiah feels a leading to do something, to go back, to rebuild the city of his ancestors. But Nehemiah can't just pack up and go. He's a captive. He's a slave. Nehemiah's job as a slave was to be the king's cup-bearer. That means it was his job to carry wine to the king, taste it and make sure it wasn't poisoned. But cupbearers in that day weren't just waiters and poison-testers. Nehemiah was always close to the king. He would have been an advisor and confidant. But he was still a slave and he had to go through a lot to accomplish his goal of rebuilding Jerusalem. Endurance was critical.

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 he 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? Rebuilding your home? Finding a job? 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 to engage emotionally.

**The next thing that Nehemiah did was to pray.** Here's what Nehemiah wrote: **"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).**

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 situations for a quickie prayer. This was going to take some time. Life situations that require endurance also require enduring 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, God's faithfulness, God's direction. We need to remember that too, when we're facing situations that require endurance. For God so loved the world. Remember that.

And at the same time, Nehemiah spends time confessing. He gets honest with God. Why is this important? I mentioned this a couple of weeks ago. 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, **"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. Life is easier when you travel light.

One other thing here, Nehemiah fasted. Fasting is going without food for a certain amount of time. It's 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.

The interesting thing about fasting is that it reveals the things that control us. The ancients knew this; we would do well to relearn it. We tend to cover up what's going inside us with food and other good things (Richard Foster). But fasting brings those things to the surface so we can see them and deal with them. If pride controls us, we'll be able to see it. If fear controls us, we'll be able to see it. If control controls us, we'll see that too.

So many Christians will never even consider fasting, and that's ok, but they will never experience certain facets of the faith. Fasting can be giving up one meal a day, or not eating one day a week, so that you can be more focused in prayer, see things more clearly, and see what surfaces in your life that you've been covering up. There are times and seasons during any given year that I will fast one day a week for several weeks or months. Especially when I face a decision or somebody I know is facing a crisis. This might be one of those seasons for you. Nehemiah prayed and fasted, it was a huge part of enduring.

**The next thing Nehemiah did was 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. The King could behead him for no reason at all. Nehemiah writes that he was afraid to approach the king and ask to leave and ask for the resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But Nehemiah faced his fears and asked for help. The king allowed Nehemiah go to Jerusalem and even gave him what he needed to rebuild the walls.

For you and me, if we're going to endure, we do the same thing—face the fears and ask for help. This last week I made three very important phone calls asking for help. One was to an old friend I called for some advice about a really amazing opportunity for our church. The second call I made was to a professional coach I've used over the years. I need help with insight as we move forward. The third call was to Christian counselor. I need help with some of the images in my mind from the tornado and releasing that stress in healthy ways.

I know I can help other people better, when I seek help and resources for myself. The resources you need to endure 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 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 of many kinds. That's what Nehemiah did and it works. Face your fears and ask for help.

Then, **Nehemiah prepared for opposition.** He began to lead the people in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem. And as Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls, the regional governors threatened him and the builders; they accused him of trying to make himself a king; they spread rumors, they tried to trick him, tried to kill him. These regional governors, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, the 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. Because they are prepared for opposition. You've got to be ready for opposition to do what you are trying to accomplish in life. Sometimes opposition will just be stuff that happens. Sometimes it will be people that are mean-spirited. Sometimes it's the evil that's in our world. Just know it's coming. The termites are coming.

Speaking of rumors, last week I heard the rumor that I'm leaving Joplin. Just so you know, that would be a violation of my parole, so I'm not going anywhere! Rumors like that are undermining. Some people just like to undermine. Somebody told our receptionist this week that I don't write my own messages. That all I do is buy them off the internet. Listen, I want to promise you two things. I will take good ideas from anywhere that lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ, and I will always give credit for where those ideas come from. I'm far from perfect, and it hurts that people say things like that. But part of enduring is knowing that opposition will come. Be prepared with love, patience, courage and truth.

So Nehemiah prepares the people for opposition and all the while he reminds them why they're doing what they're doing. **"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).**

Endurance means you never forget what you're fighting for. You remind yourself over and over again. As you endure with your family through that difficult time, maybe it has to do with the tornado and rebuilding your life, or maybe it has to do with one of your kids and what direction they're heading, or maybe it's your spouse and your relationship there, 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!

**Nehemiah showed another attribute of endurance, trust.** 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 the walls they were rebuilding. **"Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" (Nehemiah 4:20).**

Trusting God is huge. God has not promised to make life easy for us, but he has promised 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.

Finally, another overarching characteristic of endurance that Nehemiah shows is this. 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 facing it together.

I've heard story after story of people helping people in the aftermath of the tornado. People helping friends with insurance issues, people watching the kids so their parents can take care of things they need to, people opening up their homes for others to stay. We pull together.

When we talk about this kind of endurance, we're talking about love. One day the Apostle Paul was thinking about Jesus; about his love. And what that love of Jesus' looks like. He wrote, **Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"** (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

The reason I bring this up is because in stressful times all of us need to be reminded to live out love, and to endure all things. We've got some endurance issues right here. We'll be back to three worship services here at OCC soon, and one of those worship times will be an EPIC service, but you will have to endure different worship times for a little while longer. But love endures all things. And obviously we'll have to endure a different location for a while. You'll have to endure sitting in a different place because we've combined 4 services into two and those people from those other services are sitting in the spot you like to sit in, aren't they?! But love endures all things. If you're an EPIC person you have to endure not being able to sit at a table and drink your coffee during worship. But love endures all things.

And the people sitting around you are not the same people who sat around you before. But love endures all things. I'm trying to gently lead into this: Two weeks ago a man who is a friend of mine, who loves Jesus, who is active at Saint Paul's, who shines the light of Christ wherever he goes, and who happens to have an unconventional wardrobe. This friend of mine heard somebody say two weeks ago in this room, "I can't believe he'd wear that to church."

My knee-jerk reaction is to say to the person who made that comment, "If you think that people have to dress a certain way to come to church, then we are not the church for you." That's what I want say, but love endures all things. Love even endures those people who don't endure all things. Just so we're clear: No matter what you wear, (just make sure your bits and pieces covered, right?), but no matter what you wear you are welcomed here and loved here. And if you don't like what somebody else is wearing, you, too, are welcomed here. Just keep your unloving comments to yourself and repent of that sin. Because love endures all things.

God wants to move us from point A to point B. 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, maybe in our faith, maybe in our love. But God is ready and willing to equip us with amazing endurance.

I challenge you to become a strong finisher. Nehemiah lead the people in finishing the walls around J-town. The world looked on and said, "There is people, there is God, that I want to more about."

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, "Lock eyes with me." Look at Hebrew 12:2, **"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. Life wins. Amen.