

WHY I'M STILL FOLLOWING JESUS

(An Encouragement to Endure)

Quite a few people have expressed to me their surprise, that I'm still following Jesus after losing my marriage (of 33 years), my ministry, and my health (I've got bone marrow cancer). I'm just as surprised as they are that they are so surprised! It's almost like they expect me to give up on the Lord because he hasn't given me what I want. Yeah, I'm way grieved about my circumstances, pretty scared, and have had my moments of being ticked off with him, but to stop following Jesus would be the height of stupidity. He's my only constant. I have no other hub around which to revolve. I may have very little idea about what he's doing, and why he allows what he does, but I know he's with me and loves me extravagantly. Why in the world would I leave the only purpose of my life now? I'm still following Jesus because he's *real* and he's still *real important* to me.

- “You have need of endurance...” (Hebrews 10:36).
- “The one who endures to the end will be saved...” (Matthew 24:13).
- “If we endure, we will also reign with him...” (2 Timothy 2:12).
- “Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed...” (2 Timothy 3:14).
- “Hold on to what you have until I come...” (Revelation 2:25).
- “This produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.” (2 Corinthians 1:6)
- “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.” (1 Pet. 2:20)
- “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 2:3)
- “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints ...” (Revelation 14:12).

Endurance is not a special gift for a select few. We're all tempted to give up and we all need to figure out how to keep going. This is no obscure topic. The exhortation to endure is one of the Bible's big themes. Let me share with you how the Holy Spirit has been speaking to me through the Bible, through my friends, and even through my severe trials about staying on track with Jesus. I'm still following him, and here are some reasons why.

“Stand firm” and other ways to say endure...

In the face of opposition that would knock us down, trip us up so we fall down, or tempt us to bow down; we are repeatedly commanded to “*stand*,” and do so *firmly*.

- “Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to with **stand** in the evil day, and having done all, to **stand firm**” (Ephesians 6:13).
- “By **standing firm** you will gain life.” (Luke 21:19)
- “**Stand firm** in the Lord, my dear friends.” (Philippians 4:1)
- “Brothers, **stand firm** and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).
- “**Stand firm. Let nothing move you.** Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)
- “Be on your guard; **stand firm** in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.” (1 Corinthians 16:13)

- “It is by faith that you **stand firm**.” (2 Corinthians 1:24)
- “**Stand firm** then and don’t let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)
- “I will know that you **stand firm** in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:27)
- “... that you may **stand firm** in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.” (Colossians 4:12)
- “**Stand firm** and hold to the teachings we passed on to you.” (2 Thess. 2:16)
- “Be patient and **stand firm**, because the Lord’s coming is near. (James 5:8)
- “Resist him (the adversary), **standing firm** in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Peter 5:9)

Stand, stand your ground, stand firm... All these are synonyms for *endure*. *Stand* as opposed to *fall* down. *Stand your ground* and don’t give any ground to the enemy of your soul. *Stand up* to that enemy and don’t back down. *Stand there* as opposed to being moved to *someplace else*. *Stand firm* instead of being *weak* and easily moved to the wrong place by the wrong influences!

Other ways to put it...

- “If you **continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved** from the hope held out in the gospel...” (Colossians 1:23)
- “**Do not grow weary** in doing good...” (2 Thessalonians 3:13).
- “**Hold fast** to what you have until I come” (Revelation 2:25).
- “The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a while, will himself restore you and make you **strong, firm and steadfast**.” (1 Peter 5:10)

Keep going, don’t stop, hang in there, don’t give in, don’t give out, don’t give up!!!

Starting is easy, finishing is harder...

One of the most remarkable examples of endurance I’ve ever seen was the famous, “Flu game” played by the great Michael Jordan. It was game five of the 1997 NBA finals and M.J. came into the game with a bad case of the flu. He was so sick he could hardly get out of bed, and arrived to play just in time for tip-off. You could see him at time-outs struggling to keep his head up, let alone play his usual epic game. But he had no intention of sitting the game out. And once he began, he refused to quit. Perpetually at the brink of fainting, Michael stayed on the court for 44 minutes and finished the game with 38 points, resting for only four minutes! He played almost to the final buzzer and literally collapsed into the arms of Scottie Pippen, who all but carried him into the locker room. He said later, “*We wanted it real bad.*” You think?! Then he said, “*It’s all about desire... You gotta come out and do what you gotta do!*” Yeah, pretty much.

While I’m amazed that Michael Jordan endured (while playing a basketball game), I’m more amazed that Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, Paul, Peter, John, and all the apostles (except one) endured while serving the living God. But of course the all-time example of

endurance was our Lord Jesus, who “**endured the cross**, despising the shame and sat down at the right hand of God.” I’m so glad he didn’t give up when tempted to **in the desert** (the wilderness of temptation), **in the garden** (of Gethsemane), and **on the hill** (called, Golgotha). He didn’t cave in and cut short his suffering. He therefore has every right to tell me to not be *weary in well doing*. Because he didn’t quit, I’m looking to him to give me the ability to stay in the race marked out for me until it’s done. He stayed on his cross until it was “finished” (John 19:30), and with his help, I’ll be just as resolute about staying on mine.

**Keep going, don’t stop, hang in there,
don’t give in, don’t give out, don’t give up!!!**

Starting is easy, finishing is harder – especially when we’re talking about “*finishing well*.” (With cancer in my blood I seem to thinking a lot about finishing.) Not only have I seen way too many Christians over the years drop out of the race, but I’ve had my own share of temptations to give up. Jesus told us that in this world we’d have “*trouble*.” Not one of his most famous promises, but, oh so true! But so far, by his grace, I’m still following after almost 40 years. And I can tell you honestly it’s not because it’s the most convenient or the easiest option. It’s not because I don’t know what else to do after all these years. Like many of my friends who are casualties of the same war, I could just as well fall prey to the devil’s deadly deceptions. I’m still following because... well now that I think of it, I’m still following because of a lot of things. It’s because he’s real, he’s good, he helps me, he’s faithful to forgive me, he loves me relentlessly... I could go on and on.

Here is one of the entries from my journal that I wrote during a season of intense difficulty.

Help me embrace this season of suffering, Lord. Help me get better, go deeper, grow closer to you. Help me see this as an opportunity to let you do whatever it is that you want to do in me. My temptation and tendency is to close up, protect myself, and defend myself instead of open up (like soil) to your seed. Most days I’m wading if not wallowing in self-pity and self centered thinking. Empower me, crucify me, raise me, heal me. Help me take the eternal view and get the bigger picture. If I can’t see the picture, help me know there is a picture that you’re painting with me in it. May I be a graceful sufferer, and not difficult for you and others to be around. Where in the suffering there is a cross, help me not shirk it. Give me grace to die on it. Give me faith to wait for the resurrection that follows it – however delayed it might be. I think of the traffic signs that say, “Expect Delays.” – I can see that this is most definitely a day of delays. I’m learning to expect them.

A little Greek...

I’m not a Greek language scholar or anything, but there are a couple of terms used in the New Testament that have helped me understand this topic of enduring. They’re usually translated *patience and perseverance*: *hupomone* and *macrothumia*. (Pronounce them anyway you want to; it only matters to seminary professors and Greeks.)

Hupomone is a compound word (made up of a couple of parts) that means: *to abide under*. It implies that *enduring* is staying put rather than splitting (escaping) while under heavy circumstances. In other words, if you’re patient you don’t run away from your tough times, you stay where you are, and endure it. God will show up somehow, in some way, and do whatever it is he does to either rescue you out of the oppressive circumstance or give you the strength you need to endure it even longer.

The old line is, "I don't pray for patience, because, rather than just giving it to me, God gives me trials to develop it." My solution is to pray that my friends will have more patience!

The other term, *macrothumia* is also a compound word that, in the literal sense, means: long (macro), to suffer or to be angry (thumia). In other words, if you have this quality you're willing to suffer a long time before you'll get ticked off and quit. You won't give up easily, if ever. You're in it for the long haul. You're an endurer. "*Lord, give my friends longsuffering!*"

Pain-free Christianity...?

I know a lot of people who believe that, as Christians, we deserve a pain-free existence. I bring this up because it's one factor that affects our ability to endure. If we think we're supposed to have an easy life, and then life doesn't exactly cooperate, we can tend to freak out and lose our will to stay in the race. When difficulties come, some people feel they have the right to feel sorry for themselves or look around for somebody to blame. Since life is something other than trouble-free, they either stop following Jesus altogether, or devote all of their time to *coping* with their difficulties. Then they have no time or energy left over for living lives of service to God and people.

Here's another entry from my journal in the early stages of my trials:

Last night was the worst pain yet... I woke up twice in agony and took an hour or so to get back to sleep. I was at my wits end this time and came real close to cursing you. Forgive me Lord! I'm weak and in pain. I know you're good and all you do is good. Job asked, "Should we not accept both blessing and trial from your hand?" I'm truly trying to please you in this trial, but honestly, I'm unable to control my reaction to the pain. My physical pain bleeds into the emotional trauma of my marital loss and it simply seems unbearable. I'm afraid of wearing out my incredible friends though they've been quite angelic with me. But I know they have their limits. Please refresh, empower, and bless them with heavenly blessings.

As I said, quite a few people have asked me if I'm still following Jesus since going through such tough circumstances. And though my "hell of mercy" has been horrible at times, I guess one of the reasons I haven't given up is that trials don't surprise me that much. We've been warned in the Bible that they're more common than not. Suffering should be no shock since he told us not to be surprised by it (1 Peter 4:12). I expect to have some trouble in this life, since he promised we would (John 16:33). I'm not alarmed when I'm persecuted, because he told us that's what would happen (2 Timothy 3:12). That I have a cross to die on is no shocker, since we were forewarned that this was the norm for his followers (Mark 8:35). It helps me endure through the difficulties when I'm not surprised by them. He said, "*I have told you this so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.*" (John 16:4)

Two good books on endurance...

The books of *James* and *Hebrews* are the most Jewish of the writings in the New Testament. The Jews who received Jesus as Messiah in the first century were under tremendous pressure to renege on their commitment to him. These two letters reinforced their will to persevere and ours too.

- We are his house ***if we hold on to our courage and the hope*** of which we boast. Hebrews 3:6
- We share in Christ, ***if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end***" Hebrews 3:14.
- ***Let us hold firmly to the faith*** we possess. Hebrews 4:14

- We want each of you to **show the same diligence to the very end**, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who **through faith and patience inherit what has been promised**. Hebrews 6:11-12
- **Let us hold fast** the confession of our hope without wavering Hebrews 10:23.
- So **do not throw away your confidence**; it will be richly rewarded. **You need to persevere** so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:35-36
- **But we are not of those who shrink back** and are destroyed, but of those who believed and are saved. Hebrews 10:39
- Consider him who **endured** such opposition from sinful men, so that you will **not grow weary and lose heart**. Hebrews 12:3
- **Endure hardship** as discipline; God is treating you as sons. Hebrews 12:7

Paul, was watching his Jewish friends drop out of the race by the droves. They were being brutally treated for their faith, and out of fear and self-preservation, were slipping away from Jesus. He says to them and to us, *“Hold on, don’t shrink back, endure hardship, don’t grow weary, be patient, be diligent to the end...!”*

It helps me endure through the difficulties when I’m not surprised by them.

James also is emphatic about *enduring*. He begins his letter telling his readers to *persevere, to be patient, and stand firm*; and then ends his writing the same way.

- Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops **perseverance**. **Perseverance** must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything... Blessed is the man who **remains steadfast** under trial, for when he has **stood the test** he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. James 1:2-4, 12
- **Be patient** until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too **be patient and stand firm**, because the Lord’s coming is near... As an example of **patience in the face of suffering**, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have **persevered**. You have heard of Job’s **perseverance** and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. James 5:7-8, 10

Notice James’ emphasis on endurance:

- *The testing of your faith develops perseverance...*
We can get it as we suffer.
- *Perseverance must finish its work...*
We have to endure and not give up before we get to the finish line.
- *Remain steadfast under trial...*
Stay in the pain until it does its work.
- *Stand the test...*
Hang in there. Don’t give up. You’re being tested – don’t flunk!
- *Be patient in the face of suffering...*

You're miserable, but don't give in. God is with you.

- *Those who persevere are blessed...*
When you endure, you will get something good from God.
- *What the Lord finally brought about...*
He is trying to do something great in you - in the end. Wait for it.
- *The Lord is full of compassion and mercy...*
He may seem far away, but he understands your difficulties and cares.

If James begins and ends his letter with telling us to *endure*, I wonder if most of what he wrote in the in-between chapters was practical counsel on *how* to do this enduring. You might consider reading the epistle again with this in mind.

Speaking of Calvinism...

It's always puzzled me that one of what they call, "The Five Points" of Calvinism is "*Perseverance*." It's the final component in their acrostic T.U.L.I.P. (It's all very theological and I won't get into it now.) But to them *perseverance* is synonymous with "eternal security," which means once you're genuinely saved, you'll always stay that way. I won't stop now and argue the weakness of that theory, but in my thinking, there's irony in the use of the term "perseverance" to describe the doctrine. They believe that once you're saved you inevitably *will* persevere till the end and stay saved.

But the whole point of the dozens and dozens of exhortations in the Bible to persevere, to endure, to refuse to give up is that it is indeed possible to give up. Why tell us over and over to endure if it's inevitable that we will? To endure takes courage and effort. It takes something my mom used to call, "*stick-to-it-ive-ness*." It's a choice, a moment by moment decision to resist the temptation to cave in. Does God help us to make the choice to keep on keeping on? Sure He does. He's the God who "gives endurance," Romans 15:4-5. But it's not a gift that's forced on us. We have to receive it, unwrap it and use it.

Too many rocks and weeds...

*Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, **Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.** Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, **they last only a short time.** When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, **they quickly fall away.** Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and **choke the word, making it unfruitful.** Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown." Mark 4:13-20*

Most people don't go deep enough or last long enough in their relationship to Jesus to become fruitful followers. At least that's what Jesus seems to indicate in this parable. Three of the four scenarios where people heard the good news, and some even received it, started and didn't finish. 75% didn't endure. That's a lot! Only one in four continued all the way to a fruitful life. Those are some pretty crummy odds when you think of it that way. Seed sown on the path and among rocks and weeds indicates people short-sighted in their relationship with Jesus. The person with the hard heart, the heart with impenetrable obstacles, or the heart full of competing influences doesn't persevere to fruitfulness. If we expect to continue all the way to fruit-bearing we'll have to recognize and remove the rocks and the weeds in our lives.

He mentions a few of such influences. People quickly fall away when they have shallow or calloused hearts, and only let Jesus touch the surface of their lives. Others fail to endure because worries, wealth, other unworthy goals devour their attention. Friends of mine who've endured to fruitfulness over the years are ones who have been particularly ruthless with their rocks and weeds. I don't believe that a person is born with either a receptive heart or one that is unreceptive. I think Jesus is giving us the heads up in the parable about doing due diligence about keeping our hearts plowed and open to kingdom seed. If we fail to do this, the consequences will be dire. We won't ever grow up and be a verdant tree from which others may pick life-giving fruit. But if we will deal with our rocks and weeds (so to speak), we will endure, grow up, and become healthy fruit-bearers.

Three of the four scenarios where people
heard the good news,
and some even received it,
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Christians are not quitters...

A San Francisco Giants pitcher lost three games in a row and was asked about it. *"It's frustrating,"* he said. *"But I gotta keep plugging. Nothing good happens when you quit!"*

In reading through the book of Acts I noticed a bunch of people who refused to quit.

- *They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... Acts 2:42*
- *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ... Acts 5:42*
- *Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God... Acts 13:43*
- *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me... Acts 20:24*

If you follow Paul (in Acts) from city to city on his missionary journeys, you'll see that though severely persecuted, at each point, he gathered the courage to continue, and not quit. Here's a bullet point summary of his sufferings on those journeys.

- In Jerusalem – they tried to murder him... and he didn't quit!
- In Antioch - they incited a mob against him and ran him out of town... and he didn't quit!
- In Lystra – Paul was stoned to death (and obviously, later was raised)... and he didn't quit!
- In Philippi – he was beaten and jailed... and he didn't quit!
- In Thessalonica – he was run out of town... and he didn't quit!
- In Berea – he fled for his life... and he didn't quit!
- In Athens – he was laughed out of town... and he didn't quit!
- **In Corinth – he was threatened with his life... and he didn't quit!**
- In Jerusalem – he was beaten and jailed... and he didn't quit!
- On his journey to Rome – he was starved, shipwrecked, and bitten by a poisonous snake... and he didn't quit!

He wrote to the Corinthians: *"We are sore pressed at every point, but not hemmed in; we are at our wit's end, but never at our hope's end; we are persecuted by men, but never abandoned by God; we are knocked down, but not knocked out"* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Paul was no quitter!

I've been reading the autobiography of a Chinese believer named, "Brother Yun," called, The Heavenly Man. Without doubt, this is an extraordinary man. For his faith he has been beaten literally within an inch of his frail life many times, jailed, starved, shocked with an electric baton, been thrown into a cesspool of human excrement, urinated on, and more. His story is intensely disturbing, and yet incredibly inspiring. But, like Paul, this diminutive apostle refuses to quit. I was blown away particularly by a hymn that he cites as part of the worship repertoire of the persecuted believers in China. Can you picture singing these words in your own warm and comfy church service this Sunday?

Chorus:

*To be a martyr for the Lord, to be a martyr for the Lord
I am willing to die gloriously for the Lord.*

*Those Apostles who loved the Lord to the end
Willingly followed the Lord down the path of suffering
John was exiled to the lonely island of Patmos
Stephen was stone to death by an angry crowd.*

*Matthew was stabbed to death in Persia by a mob
Mark died as horses pulled his two legs apart
Doctor Luke was cruelly hanged
Peter, Philip and Simon were crucified on a cross.*

*Bartholomew was skinned alive by the heathen
Thomas died in India as five horses pulled his body apart
The apostle James was beheaded by King Herod
Little James was cut in half by a sharp saw*

*James the brother of the Lord was stoned to death
Judas was tied to a pillar and shot by arrows\
Mathias had his head cut off in Jerusalem
Paul was a martyr for under Emperor Nero.*

I am willing to take up the cross and go forward

*To follow the apostles down the road of sacrifice
That tens of thousands of precious souls can be saved
I am willing to leave all and be a martyr for the Lord.*

Brother Yun and the Apostle Paul were no quitters!

Satan, on the other hand, is a quitter! Think about it. He left his privileged post in God's throne room. He now devotes his entire existence to getting others to quit with him. He's like the guy on the High School football team, who, at one point was a key player for the team. But he wanted to do things his way, and get all the credit for it, so the Coach wisely kicked him off the team. Now he spends all of his time trying to get everyone else to quit the team. He wants everyone to join him in his miserable rebellion and join his team which is called, "The Quitters!" The numbers on their backs are all "666" - the number of "The Quitters!"

Don't quit!
Stay with our team!
Say, "No!" to the sourpuss deceiver!

No lone runners...

The following is one of the most encouraging promises in the Bible:

*And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. **I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever**, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And **I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me**. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul. (Jeremiah 32:38-41)*

God demands a lot of his followers, but what he demands of us he promises to do *in us*. This Christian life is more of a partnership with God than any kind of solo effort. He invites us to a race and then runs it with us. He won't *make* us finish or win the race for us, but he will do all he can to give us the strength we need to continue. It's not all grit and self-discipline. All the glory for any success we have goes to him. He's running alongside of us encouraging and empowering us to stay on the track. He's the "*God who gives endurance*," Romans 15:5. We can't take any credit for continuing to follow him. We never could. He beckoned us in the first place and continues to beckon. I know that in my case, he loved me first and showed himself to me long before I had any clue about him. And now he keeps after me, coaching me on how to persevere along the way.

He invites us to a race and then runs it with us.
He won't *make* us finish or win the race for us,
but he will do all he can to give us
the strength we need to continue.

Here are some verses that have helped me keep going when I've wanted to quit:

- "It is God who makes both us and you **stand firm** in Christ." 2 Corinthians 1:21

It's pretty obvious to me that it's not me that makes me stand firm in Christ. I need help. No, I need more than help. I need him to be my strength. He's not *part* of what keeps me standing. He's the

whole enchilada (as they say). If it weren't for him I wouldn't have been standing in the first place. That I'm still standing is entirely his doing.

- *“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” (Jude 24)*

Since one of the vertebrae in my neck turned to mush and I had titanium rods and plates inserted to prop up my spine, I've been rather vigilant to try not to fall. I think about it mostly when getting in the shower with all that slippery water and soap. So, I quote this verse every time I carefully “hop” into the tub. Then I ask the Lord to help me not fall either physically or spiritually all day long. Either could be devastating to my frail self. I can't afford to fall in the bathtub and hurt my neck or fall into sin and damage my soul. He's there and is able to keep me from falling!

- *“The grace of the Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 1:14)*

I think he's saying that God puts in us three things: *grace, faith and love*. If I'm willing to receive it, he gives me his grace, he puts faith in me and imparts in me the ability to love people the way he loves them. Someone said, *“The Christian life is the life he lived then, lived now by him in us.”* Back to the *faith* that he pours out; I take this to mean that when I'm having a tough time trusting him for the strength to keep going, he dumps it on me. I don't have to try to conjure it up. I just need to get under the spout where this faith comes out!

- *“By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).*

Yes, I have to exert effort to endure, but at the end of the day I always see that it wasn't me, but him who carried me along. I keep *going* because his grace keeps *coming*.

- *“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.” (1 Timothy 1:12)*

Isn't that an incredible statement? If you start at the end and work backwards it goes like this:

1. God trusts me to serve him... *Why?*
2. Because I'm faithful... *How can you be faithful?*
3. He gives me strength to be faithful and...
4. I thank him for it!

I keep *going* because his grace keeps *coming*.

- *“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May **the God who gives endurance and encouragement** give you a spirit of unity among yourselves.” Romans 15:4-5*

We can't endure by willing ourselves to be strong. He's our strength. From within us he gives us the ability to persevere even in the most difficult of situations.

- *“Let us run with **endurance** the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus**” (Hebrews 12:1-2).*

Jesus Christ is our most profound example of endurance. Seeing and savoring him is the source of strength that keeps us striving against sin, Satan, sickness and sabotage. (Wow, that's lot of "s's"!) And the place he is seen most clearly and powerfully is in how he endured his cross. He endured and showed us how! We can only endure by "looking to Jesus."

- *"We were under great pressure **far beyond our ability to endure...** but this happened that we might **not rely on ourselves but on God...** on him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us... as you help us by your prayers..."* (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

I've always said, "The Christian life's not hard to live... It's impossible! Only he can do it and he still does it while in us." To endure, as with everything in the life of the follower, is "far beyond our ability." It's only as we "rely not on ourselves, but on God" that we'll endure.

- *"...being **strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience...**"* (Colossians 1:11)
- *We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and **your endurance inspired by hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:3)*

Our hope in Jesus inspires us to keep going until the hope is fulfilled.

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, O, take and seal it;
Seal it for thy courts above.
"Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," Robert Robinson*

All the way to the finish...

"The one who endures to the end will be saved..." (Matthew 24:13).

Ten years ago or so I started thinking about entering the last quarter of my life. I didn't have cancer yet, at least if I did, I didn't know it. But everyone who lives, dies eventually. It's pretty much of a sure thing. We're all facing finishing, and I for one want to do it right. Regardless how much time I have left, I want to finish well. And since my finish might be closer now than I had originally assumed, I'm particularly interested in how I might do well on this last leg of the journey (however long the leg is).

Even if you're much younger, and hopefully healthier than I, I want to encourage you to start thinking about how you're going to finish your race. Since we don't really know how close we are to our finish line, better now than later to think about positioning yourself to make a strong finish. I hope you don't consider this topic a downer. I'm not so much talking about dying, but about finishing the task you are here to accomplish – and finishing it with gusto! I'm encouraging you at whatever stage of the race you're in, to do what you need to do now to put yourself in the best place possible for later.

I have a few recommendations for finishing well – a few "Don'ts" if you will:

- **Don't rely on good beginnings.** Good beginnings don't insure good endings. Doing well at the middle and end of a race is as important as beginning well. Whatever trophies you have from past successes are fine, but they won't give you a lasting legacy. A legacy that lasts requires a strong finish.
- **Don't coast your way to the finish line.** Momentum early in the race won't suffice later in the race. You can't count on the rest of the race being downhill from now on.
- **Don't get off track.** I've never left the track entirely, but I've sure fallen down on it a lot! I've certainly made more than my share of bad choices. I've repeatedly slowed my progress down by self-centered living. Remember that when you get off track, you have to come back to the place you left in order to continue. Opportunities have been missed, habits have been formed, and the race went on without you. It makes it that much harder to finish well. Stay on track!
- **Don't give up when it gets hard** - and it will get hard at some points along the way. A true Marathon is 26.2 miles. Marathoners use the phrase, "hitting the wall" to describe the dreaded point during a race when your muscle glycogen reserves become depleted, and a feeling of fatigue engulfs you. I only know about this from reading about it. I have no intention of running anywhere farther than to the kitchen at mealtime. But they say it's an awful feeling similar to what your body would feel like if you ran into a wall. That right there is the kind of thing that keeps me from running long (or short) distances. The race you're in for Christ is a marathon and it will have some uphill points. Don't give up!

Good beginnings don't insure good endings.

- **Don't quit before the finish line.** As they say in sports, "Leave nothin' on the field (or in this case, the track)!" So many Christians feel as though they've already paid their dues; that what they once did for Christ was all they need to do for the rest of their lives. They ran a good first lap or two, and they're satisfied with that. I don't want to retire early and be taken to heaven while on a spiritual nap. I'd rather cross the finish line winded from giving it all I had!
- **Don't overestimate your ability.** *"Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought... If you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall..."* (Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 10:12). Don't get cocky! It wasn't *your* ability that got you started or kept you going so far, and it won't take you home either. Like I said, *"The Christian life is impossible!"* You can't live it. Only Jesus can do it, and he does it *in you* if you'll let him.
- **Don't underestimate your opponent's ability.** I'm not referring to the other runners (they're not your enemies), but to the one who sneaks onto the track to trip up the runners. *"Be self controlled and alert. You're enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8).

No fear...?

I can't even begin to tell how terrified I've been as a cancer victim. Just the thought of having a potentially fatal and merciless foreign enemy in my body is indescribably scary. Leading up to, and during many of my cancer treatments (radiation, surgeries, chemo therapy to name a few of the big ones), has been terrifying.

I wrote about my fears in my journal sometime back...

I started losing hope yesterday and thought a few times about taking my life so that I could avoid all of this and my family and friends wouldn't have to be drug through the ups and downs of cancer only to have me die anyway. I truly do not believe that this would be pleasing to you for me to take this into my own hands, but I'm really going to need your grace and strength to resist the temptation. I know that my "times are in your hands." I know that I have "come to the kingdom for such a time as this." I know that I don't belong to myself, but have been "bought with a price." I am owned, and am not the owner. I'm the customer, not the proprietor. It's not for me to decide when and how I make the transition to be with you in heaven. But, Lord, I do beg you to have mercy on me and either heal me or take me home. I know that so many suffer, and many much more than I. I glean courage reading about others who have endured and brought glory to you in the enduring.

I don't have any profound counsel on how to face your fears, other than to say just that – you have to face them. I've had nowhere to run except to the Lord. I can't wish this stuff away, I refuse to self-medicate to escape the fear. I only know that he's with me in my scary situations.

When he says over and over in the Bible: "Fear not," I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean, "*Don't experience the emotion of fear.*" I don't think that God commands us to have any certain emotion. I think he's more interested in our attitudes and in the actions that follow. I call them, Christian ACTitudes (attitudes that lead to actions.) When he tells us not to be afraid, I think he's encouraging (even commanding) us to not be paralyzed by our fears. There are many things of which we should be afraid – cliffs, sharp objects, growling pit bulls, and falling away from Christ for instance. But we mustn't let our fears get the best of us. We mustn't let fear lure us off the track and out of the race marked out for us.

Psalms 55 got my attention recently as I was thinking about enduring in spite of my fears. David's life was almost constantly in jeopardy. When he was scared of Saul, the Philistines, and even of some members of his own family he wrote:

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me. Horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest – I would flee far away and be in the desert."

I love his honesty about his fears. He didn't do the *spiritual-giant* routine and pretend he was above it all. He admitted, "*I'm scared!*" But at the end of his journal entry he wrote: "*But as for me I trust in you.*" In other words, "*Yes, I have all these fears, but I trust that you (God) know what you're doing. I may or may not someday understand your ways, but I'm content to know that you know.*"

I don't want to retire early
and be taken to heaven
while on a spiritual nap.
I'd rather cross the finish line

winded from giving it all I had!

When I think of “fearless,” I think of Paul. Nothing seemed to intimidate him. He kept going in spite of ruthless opposition. But it doesn’t mean that he wasn’t afraid. To the Corinthians he admitted, *“I came to you in weakness and fear and trembling”* (1 Corinthians 2:3). In Acts we’re told that God saw his fear while in Corinth, and encouraged him to move on in spite of how he felt. *“Don’t be afraid. Keep on speaking... For I am with you... I have many people in this city”* (Acts 18:9) Corinth intimidated Paul, but with God’s encouragement he went forward anyway. His fear didn’t keep him from doing what he was called to do. His enemies tried to drive him out of town, but he stayed in Corinth for another year and a half speaking boldly. Paul didn’t let his fears get *the best of him*. He reserved *the best of himself* for Jesus. I’m trying to do the same.

What friends are for...

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

I suggested earlier that our opponents are not human but spiritual. We’re not running against other people as though there’s some sort of competition between us. We’re not trying to beat other runners to the finish line. It’s Satan and his demons that are our enemies. They’re the ones who are trying to trip us up while we’re running our race, or trick us into leaving the track all together.

One of my very favorite passages in all of the Bible regarding our need for each other is 1 Samuel 23:16, *“Jonathan helped David find strength in God.”* Jonathan couldn’t actually *give* David strength or *be* his strength. But he could help him *find* strength, and he helped him find it in God. David was scared of Saul (and rightly so) and confused about how to proceed. My guess is that he was tempted to give up his quest for the kingdom. He needed strength to endure and he couldn’t seem to locate it himself. He needed someone to help him. That’s what friends are for. They help each other find the strength that God provides in himself. It goes on to say that Jonathan and David “made a covenant” with each other that day and went home. Though we’re not told what kind of covenant they made, my guess is that they agreed to continue helping each other find strength in God.

That’s what friends do. They run alongside their friends and encourage each other to stay in the race. They’re not trying to show anybody up. They don’t have beat any other runners to the finish line. They’re just trying to stay on track themselves, and help others do the same. From time to time they need others to help them find God’s strength for the race and they, in turn, are happy to do the same for their fellow runners.

“Encourage one another daily as long as it is called, Today, so that none of you will be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13).

Unprofitable servants...

Over the years I’ve seen many of my Christian friends fall back to their wayward ways. Some site pain and suffering as an excuse. *“What has God ever done for me that I should deny myself my old pleasures? I’ve lived the way he wanted me to and asked him to relieve me of these trials and still I get no relief. What’s the point of being a Christian if he doesn’t keep his part of the bargain? I’m tired of doing the Christian thing if things aren’t going to be any better for me than this!”* This is an ageless ploy of the deceiver. Asaph echoes the argument: *“Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.”* (Psalm 73:13)

I empathize, I really do. I've ranted at God quite a few times, making it known to him that I didn't appreciate that all my good efforts for him didn't buy me any special privileges or exemptions from at least some of life's aches and pains. Isn't this just a sense of entitlement? "I'm entitled to something better. I serve him and now I deserve some blessing!" But when I read the Bible honestly, I'm not sure that it actually works that way. In fact, I'm pretty sure it doesn't. I know that God has given us a bunch of promises in the Bible about his help and participation in our lives. But it's certainly not something that we *earn* with our allegiance to him. He doesn't owe us anything. We're the ones who owe him!

Knowing this helps me persevere. He's not on trial with me as his judge and I'm not holding him hostage to his Word. He's the Judge and I'm the judged. I'm the servant and he's the one served.

"We are unprofitable servants and have done only that which was our duty to do." (Luke 17:10) I think "unprofitable" means that God owes us nothing. We aren't *profitable* for him. We bring him no profits. By serving him we're not adding anything to him. He doesn't need us for anything. Yes, he can be blessed by us, but he isn't dependent on us. Therefore, we don't do what we do for him in order to profit him in any way. We also don't bring profits to ourselves by serving him. We don't do what we do to benefit ourselves. God owes us no wages for our work in his kingdom. We're not earning a fair wage. We're the servants and he's the Master.

So when trouble comes our way, we won't stop serving Jesus. We have no, "I-Owe-You's" from him, because it's *us* who do all the owing. It's our duty and our grand privilege to know, love and enduringly serve the living God!

**He doesn't owe us anything.
We're the ones who owe him!**

I will not give up...

I was on a prayer-and-writing retreat at my friends' house in a small mountain town for 6 weeks. I was writing my memoir about the two-year period during which I lost my wife, my ministry, and my health. And I was spending a lot of time praying for direction about the next season of my life. I've been feeling for quite some time that he wanted me to move to the Mission District of San Francisco to somehow serve the poor and make disciples. Frankly, though I'm excited about it, I'm pretty scared to actually go and do it. (Maybe by the time you read this I will have made the move and begun finding places of service. To date, it's still in the 'dream state.')

Anyway, I was thinking about the fears I was experiencing about my uncertain health, the challenging prospect of living alone in The City (and not really the nicest part of it), and serving in some ways unfamiliar to me. The story from the Gospels about Jesus and the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee in the storm came to my mind. Peter and the crew were obviously scared. They must have wanted to turn the boat around and go back, but Jesus had said, "Let's go to the other side." So, with his encouragement and supernatural involvement, they made it to the other shore. I figured if they could work through their fears and not be paralyzed by them, so could I. It's with that background in mind that I wrote a simple song.

*Help me endure through the wind through the waves
May I be sure, give me faith to be brave
Quell my fears, dry my tears, help me be brave
Please draw near, come right here, help me be brave*

I will not give in I will not give up

You said, "Let's go" - for me that's enough

Ooooooh I'll not give up

Nooooo I'll not give up

This storm is raging I will not give up

The wind's against me and the sea is rough (but)

Ooooooh I'll not give up

Nooooo I'll not give up

(If you are interested to hear the song, you can find the audio file of it on the website.)

Joy in the journey...

I hope I'm not giving the impression with all this talk about "enduring" that the preferred mood of the follower of Jesus is dismal and dour. Though it might sound like it, I'm really not saying, "*It's hard to live for him and even harder to continue living for him. Nobody said this would be easy, so put your head down and just endure it!*" While at times it might feel just like that, this doesn't describe the sum total of Christian endurance. No doubt, "longsuffering" (being willing to suffer a long time) is a big part of finishing well. But there is *joy in the journey* as well. The same Spirit who imparts longsuffering also plants joy in our hearts. (Both of them are listed as "fruits" of the Spirit in Galatians 5.) The trip can, and hopefully will include, a *joyful endurance*.

Here's an entry from my journal a while back:

During the worship time this evening, we sang, I will rejoice I will rejoice... and I felt permission for the first time in a long time to have joy. I think you're saying to me that it's OK to have joy, to enjoy. I wrote down the words, "Joyful Endurance." Those words don't seem to go together and though it seems oxymoronic, I want some of this happy resilience that I think may be available to me. I see Jesus exuding this quality in the accounts of his life on earth.

It was he who "... for the joy that was set before him, endured..." (Hebrews 12). I have a lot to endure through – a lot! But I want to do it with as much joy as I can possibly get from you! "The joy of the Lord is my strength." (Nehemiah 8:10) Romans 12 also juxtaposes these seemingly incongruous qualities of joy and perseverance: "Joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

The trip can, and hopefully will include, a joyful endurance.

The Parable usually known as the "Prodigal Son" (Luke 15) could just as easily be called the "Parable of the Brother Who Wouldn't Party." It actually fits the context more readily when we focus our attention on the older brother, who like the Pharisees, hadn't learned to celebrate the grace of the Father. Some of the most joyless people I know are Christians. When invited by the father, they refuse to join the party. Like the dour older brother, they say, "*I've been slaving for you all these years...*". They may be holy but they aren't very happy. Yes, they're enduring, but are doing very little enjoying of their relationship with the Father. They continue to live in the Father's house but don't know much about the Father's heart. They're going to endure. They'll gut it out to the bitter end, but they're joyless servants rather than happy sons and daughters.

I noticed that though the father invites his eldest son to the party, the parable ends without telling us whether or not he accepted the invitation. It keeps us hanging. Did he join the party? We'll never know. I think Jesus is saying, "How about you, will you come in and celebrate? Will you merely endure and stay in his house, or will you enjoy him and be at home with him?"

There is a finish line...

If we endure, we will also reign with him... 2 Timothy 2:12

OK, so there's *joy in the journey*, but don't forget there's a finish, a goal for which we're persevering. We're not just running, we're running *toward* something. It's just coincidence, but the first three letters of "*endurance*" spell, "*end.*" There is an *end*, a final objective toward which we endure. Jesus told his disciples that whoever "endured to the end" would be saved. There's an ultimate *goal* of our endurance!

"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. We do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly, I do not fight like a man beating the air. No I beat my body and make it my slave, so that after I've preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." 1 Corinthians 9:25-27

We're not just running and training for the fun of it. There's a race to run with a finish line at the end of it. We want to win. We want to hear his, "*Well done!*" Though to have him with us cheering us on in our grueling race is a magnificent joy, we run primarily because he's going to be at the finish line to welcome us with open arms. The alternative of dropping out before the end and the consequence of facing him later is what we want to avoid at all costs. We're running to stand proudly before our Friend at the finish line rather than cower before him as Judge at the judgment seat.

Our efforts to endure through trials will all be worth it because they lead to "eternal life" (Matthew 19:29; John 12:25; Romans 2:7; Galatians 6:8). Our perseverance through "our light and momentary troubles" along the way will someday produce an "eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17)! We can rejoice through persecution knowing that it will be worth it because "great is our reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:12). When we refuse to give up in our well doing we will "reap a harvest in the proper time" (Galatians 6:9). We're glad to make sacrifices for the kingdom, knowing we will be "repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14). "To him who overcomes I will the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).

Yes, there is joy on the journey because he's with us, cheering us on. But don't forget that our joyful endurance flows from the hope of what's coming in the future. Tough times along the way are sufferable in joy because they are suffered in hope. "*We consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us*" (Romans 8:18). We endure not so much because life is good, but because death is gain. Christ is the life we live now and he is the gain we'll have in the life we live next. It all comes down to the fact that we'd "*rather be away from the body*" because that would mean being "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8).

**We're running to stand proudly
before our Friend at the finish line
rather than cower before him
as Judge at the judgment seat.**

Don't lose your reward...

"Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully." 2

John 1:8

If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us... 2 Timothy 2:12

In between life here on earth and there in heaven where we enjoy our eternal reward is the Review, the *Audit* of our lives. Each of us will meet with our Boss, and have a "Performance Review" evaluating how we did our job as His employees. It won't have anything to do with how we lived before we received Jesus as our Savior. The review only takes into account our lives here as followers of Jesus. We will all have to give an account of how we stewarded our opportunities.

- *God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed. **Ecclesiastes 3:17***
- *For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. **Romans 14:10***
- *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. **2 Corinthians 5:10***

Martin Luther said that on his calendar there were but two days: "Today and That Day." That is, he lived his every 'today' in light of 'THE DAY' of reckoning!

Somebody said, "Make sure that you don't sacrifice eternity on the altar of NOW!" That is, don't lose your soul, or jeopardize your reward in the future by worshipping what makes you feel good today!

*If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. **1 Corinthians 3:9-15***

There won't be any lawyers there at the Judgment Seat of Christ. (I *don't* mean that no attorneys make it to heaven! Although, some might disagree.) I mean that you don't get to hire someone to represent you, or speak up for you there. There will no one looking for loop-holes and trying to get you off the hook. In fact, the Bema Seat is not a *trial* at all. It's an irrefutable accounting of our lives lived here on earth as Christians. We do have Jesus as our "Advocate" ("as One Who speaks in our defense" 1 John 2:1) *here on earth* as we bring our sins and shortcomings to God. But when we get to the Redeemer's Seat for the final audit, the record of our stewardship will have to speak for itself.

Consider how awesome it is that God in His grace cleanses *our past*, empowers *our present* and rewards *our future*. How cool is it when we let Him give His Kingdom to us, live His life in us, do His thing through us; we're in partnership with Him to create gold, silver, precious stones of eternal value. What we do *here* on earth by the will and strength of God shows up *there* in heaven as an eternal treasure reflecting God's glory back to Him forever and ever! My guess is that we won't have those crowns *on our heads* very much of the time. We'll be taking them off a lot and casting them at the feet of the One Who deserves the credit for their very existence. Their splendor is a constant tribute to the mercy and kindness of Him Who alone sits on the throne!

"He who stands firm to the end will be saved." Matthew 10:22.

This is a serious topic with a serious application. If it's true that our actions in this life will be evaluated by God; and that evaluation will determine our permanent position in the next life – then we'd better do whatever it takes to shore it up and keep on keeping on.

If we get this straight now, we won't have to be straightened out later on. Better to be confronted by the Master now than to face a fiery confrontation later. 1 Corinthians 11:31 (The Message Bible)

So, we have to examine ourselves regularly while *here* (test and quiz ourselves) to prepare for the *Final Exam there*. Do it regularly, do it honestly, do it repentantly, and ask others to help you do it by holding you accountable. Stand firm today, tomorrow, and the next until you finally stand before Jesus to give an account not how much you acted like one of his.

**How awesome it is that God
in His grace cleanses *our past*,
empowers *our present*
and rewards *our future*.**

Coronary Christians...

I heard someone encourage us to be, "*Coronary Christians*" rather than, "Adrenal Christians." With adrenaline you get a spurt of energy and then you fatigue. If you're an Adrenal Christian you're only good for bursts of energy at an emotional high point and then you crash and burn. But we need people who endure for the long haul, not sprinters but marathoners, Christians who live from the heart, not their adrenal gland – "Coronary Christians."

From my journal:

Especially in America we are addicted to adrenaline. We are dependent on it not only for doing what we need to do, but what we want to do. We don't just tap our adrenal gland for emergencies, but for recreation. If our entertainment doesn't tap the mother lode of adrenaline, we're bored. Our movies and TV shows have to stimulate us through horror or adventure (albeit vicarious adventure). The younger generation is especially addicted to the need for jumping off of high things, surfing the biggest waves, skiing the highest mountain, and driving the fastest cars. We don't know how to live from the heart anymore. If there's no adrenaline involved we're not interested. This becomes problematic physically (we wear out), socially (we can't get along with each other), and spiritually (we'll only follow Jesus when it's exhilarating enough). No wonder we fail to endure to the end. If it's not "exciting" enough for them, many hardly even endure to the end of the beginning! We have to learn to live more from the heart, from the core of our being. It's where Jesus said he'd live if we'd let him, and it's from there we'll endure.

From *why* to *what*...

My friend Larry says that he quit asking God, "Why?" because all he ever hears back is, "Trust me." I've heard others say that someday we'll understand *why* everything happened on earth. I'm not so sure about that. I'm not even sure that there is an actual reason for each and every one of our difficulties besides the fact that we live in a rebellious and pain-filled world; and stuff simply happens. God, of course, knows it, but doesn't necessary control it.

Anyway, as I've continued to try to follow him over these hard years, I've kind of transitioned from "Why?" to "What?" My question is not so much, "Why is this happening to me?" but "What do I do now that it is happening?" This seems like progress to me. It's sort of a gradual transition from cynicism to faith.

Speaking of cynicism, I've noticed that it seems to be dissipating from me. My friend, Mitch told me a story about a family during the huge earthquake in Haiti recently. The father and daughter were miraculously spared while the mother was crushed under their crumbled adobe house. I noticed that my usual cynical response wasn't ready at hand. I would normally say something like, "What's up with that? Why would God save one and not the other?! How does that work? What's his twisted thinking on that?" But I noticed that this emotional reaction wasn't there. I even tried (not very hard) to call it up, and it only weakly appeared. I was very sad for the family's tragedy, but wasn't so uptight about it or frustrated with God for allowing it.

I'm not saying that I "understand" suffering any better than before. I'm just not as disparaging about it. I don't get it, but I'm just not so jaded about this world's pain. Honestly, I think this shift in thinking has freed me to be more compassionate toward those who are suffering. Since I'm not expending so much emotional energy being ticked off with God for allowing people's suffering, I have reserves left to truly empathize. As my cynicism has dissipated over time it's created space for compassion. I'm grateful for this.

**As my cynicism has dissipated over time
it's created space for compassion.**

An enduring God...

We've been talking about enduring, and did you know that over forty times the Bible says, "... **his love endures forever.**" One Psalm contains 26 of them, one for every verse (Psalm 136)! I'm not sure that I understand this entirely, but that his love "*endures*," suggests to me that it has something to endure. In other words, his love keeps going when the odds are against it. He keeps loving us when we deserve it the least. It outlasts all our un-loveliness. It endures our sinfulness, stupidity, selfishness, and silliness. He *puts up* with us while we fail to *stand up* for him. His love doesn't quit when it gets difficult to continue. I have tears of gratitude in my eyes as I say this! In my waywardness and weakness, I must be making it hard on him, but his love endures! If he can endure me, I can stay in the race and endure for him.