

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for February 22: You can keep at it

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The word “endure” might be used in a couple of different ways with similar, although not identical, meanings. On the one hand, it might mean a person is putting up with a difficult or painful situation because he really has no other choice in the matter.

Say, for example, an individual is suffering from a severe migraine headache. In describing what he is going through, that person might say, “I am enduring pain that is unimaginable.” True enough; but aside from taking medication and lying down in a dark room, he really doesn’t have much control over that situation. He endures because there is no other option.

But on the other hand, we also could use the word “endure” to describe what a person chooses to do in a difficult situation, even though he also could opt to avoid or escape the difficulty.

A marathon runner trains hard, works out, runs every day, and on the day of the race tolerates aching legs and a heaving chest in order to complete the race. He doesn’t have to do that; at any time he could say, “No more!” and simply stop. But he keeps his eyes on the finish line and endures to the end.

This final chapter in 2 Thessalonians reminds us of the importance of choosing to persevere faithfully in our commitment to Jesus Christ.

The chapter begins with the Apostle Paul’s request that the Thessalonians

pray for him and his fellow evangelists, as well as for the work God had given them to do. He first asked them to pray that God's message would "spread rapidly and be honored" (v. 1). The Greek word translated "spread" (KJV "have free course") literally means to run, as in a race—that is, to continually move forward with purpose and direction.

We are reminded here of the divine promise contained in Isaiah 55:11: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and will achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

Paul also asked the Thessalonians to pray he and his fellow-workers would remain safe as they did the Lord's work (v. 2). Many scholars believe Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians during his 18-month ministry in the city of Corinth, during his second missionary journey. If that indeed is the case, then Acts 18:1-17 sheds some light on what the apostle might have had in mind as he wrote these words asking for prayers for their deliverance. Paul's request arose not out of a desire for personal ease and comfort; his great concern was that nothing happen that might impede his ability to effectively share the gospel message.

This passage is just one of many times when Paul requested his readers support him and his ministry through prayer. Some of those other occasions can be found in Romans 15:30-32, 2 Corinthians 1:9-11, Ephesians 6:19-20 and Colossians 4:3-4. Paul knew his ministry could not effectively be separated from the prayers of others on his behalf.

There is a story about the great baseball catcher Yogi Berra which says that during a certain critical game, the score was tied with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning. The batter stepped into the batter's box and used his bat to trace the sign of the cross in the dust covering home plate. Berra leaned over and wiped off the plate with his catcher's mitt and then said to the batter, "Why don't we let God just watch this game?"

God is not merely a disinterested spectator in our lives, and certainly not in the work we do in his name; he is a deeply-involved participant. Indeed, it is his work we are doing, not our own.

T.W. Hunt has written: "The most important work of all work is spiritual work. Spiritual work can only be accomplished by spiritual methods, and the only mover in any spiritual project must be God himself."

The encouragement to faithfully persevere is given a different emphasis in the next several verses, where Paul warned against idleness within the church family (vv. 6-12).

It has been suggested this warning had become necessary because of the keen interest the Thessalonians had in the return of Christ. Possibly some of the members of their church had become so convinced the Lord would be returning quickly that they had quit their jobs in anticipation.

Whatever the reason for the idleness of some, those unemployed individuals had become a drain on the resources of the church. Worse yet, without work to keep them busy those certain individuals had become meddlesome in the affairs of others. The NIV translates the apostle's words very cleverly: "They are not busy, they are busybodies" (v. 11).

Paul reminded them of the example of industry and diligence he himself had set during his time among them, and instructed the Thessalonians to follow that example (vv. 7-9). The rule the apostle had taught them while he was with them in person still held true: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (v. 10).

This in no way is to deny that there are some individuals who are limited by physical disability or other special circumstances, and thus are incapable of working to support themselves. It is a simple acknowledgement of the principle that if a person is able to work to provide for his needs and those of his family he ought to do so, rather than being dependent upon the

charity of others.

Verses 13-15 conclude Paul's warning against indolence with instructions about how to deal with the offending brother. Just as those idle people had the duty to live in a responsible manner, the church had the responsibility to exercise loving discipline if those individuals refused to do so. The church was to deal with those people in a way which hopefully would produce shame and a desire to repent. The goal of church discipline is always restoration to fellowship: "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (v. 15).

The book of 2 Thessalonians closes with prayer for peace (v. 16)—not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of spiritual health and wholeness which touches and transforms every area of life—and for greater experience and awareness of God's marvelous grace (v. 18). Both grace and peace are essential assets on which we rely as we anticipate that the Lord will "direct [our] hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (v. 5).