

Walter... on Not Giving Up in the Middle
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Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario
“Delighting in God to the glory of God”
www.gfcto.com

Dear Paul and all my friends at GFC,

The Lord saw fit to dump a barn-load of snow on us the other day, which had me on the tractor blowing out the driveway for near two hours. Now it wouldn't normally take so long, if it hadn't been for the layer of ice under the snow. I had to keep backing up and take a run at the drifts like a horizontal yo-yo on steroids. The whole adventure became rather tiring and there weren't a few times I thought about turning the engine off and waiting for spring.

Of course, spring never comes as fast as you'd like, and if I had left that snow to lie, Mrs. Walter would soon be out of food and I'd be out of a bed! Fact is, sometimes you have to stay at some jobs that are just plain boring or routine. Nobody jumps for joy at having to weed their garden through the dog days of summer – but it must get done, and the fruit is worth it.

It struck me while I was out throwing sand under the tractor's wheels, that there comes some dog days in the life of a church as well. Things are just humming along, no particular crises or calamities. Your barn's not on fire and your cows still milk. There is just week after week of the same stuff.

And a distracted person will feel like there is something wrong. A complaining person will invent something wrong. And an immature person will just abandon ship – which is wrong! So, I determined to do a little study and send down the fruit of my labours in a another missive. If you all feel like reading it, then Bob's your uncle.

Now, anyone who's lifted a finger knows the *start* of a task is easier than the *end*. But even the *end* is easier than the *middle*! When a man starts at plowing his arms are fresh, the day is young and his blade is sharp. When he rounds the corner to make his last turn, the hope of being done fills his step with an extra bounce! But in the middle... when the sun is hot and the blade loses its edge and its row after row after row and you wonder how on earth you will ever get to the end... in the *middle*, a man might be a tad prone to discouragement. Or any of those other D-words of the D-devil – defeat, disillusionment, despair, depression or “Drat, why'd I decide to be a farmer anyway?”

That leads me to my first point. You don't *endure* dessert. What I mean is that endurance *assumes* trouble. You *endure* a canker sore, a dead skunk under your porch or your neighbour's vacation pictures. You *enjoy* Thanksgiving dinner or a Leafs win. Somehow, many a Christian gets to thinking that their whole life ought to be feast and festivity – like “having Jesus” were some kind of pass from life's troubles and tribulations. Well, there's a bunch of hoogly if ever I heard it.

Once, Jesus painted a picture of men's hearts as dirt, and said the man with rocks in his heart will act all fruitful when he hears the Gospel, but will wilt and wither at the first blast of affliction or persecution. He does not endure and therefore was never truly born again. (Matthew 13:21)

Or when talking about the end of the age, Jesus could tell the Twelve that only the one who endures to the end will be saved. Now, what kinds of things does that man have to endure? Jesus told us. False prophets, fake Messiahs, real wars, hard famines, turbulent earthquakes, false arrest, wrongful imprisonment, miserable beatings and death. You know, just your average trials. (Mark 13)

So, we must forget this nonsense about life being easy. And by “forget this nonsense,” I mean we ought to give up burning all our energies trying to *make* it easy. A man who spends his life trying to find ease is like a man trying to empty Lake Ontario with a milk bucket. He might spend 18 hours a day, 7 days a week for 50 years scooping away, but in the end all he'll have is wet sleeves and a soggy lawn. You might spend all your days chasing after pleasure, but in the end you'll say with Old Solomon “I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

Nope, you might as well admit the curse is real and that for every bushel of grain you'll dig a barrel of weeds. There is good to be had, but not if you *live* for it. And most of life will be a case of enduring... or patiently doing what you ought to do through the boring or troublesome times.

Now, the best part of what the Bible has to say on endurance is in this realm, the realm of *trouble* – persecutions, afflictions, temptation, evil, struggle and suffering. Here is a sampling:

Romans 5:3-5 “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that **suffering** produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

1 Corinthians 4:12 “...when **persecuted**, we endure...”

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No **temptation** has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but

with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

Hebrews 10:32-33 “32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured **a hard struggle with sufferings**, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.”

1 Peter 2:19-20 “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures **sorrows while suffering unjustly**. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”

Now it is one thing to write all those words down, but quite another to live them.

When Job lost all, he sat down and humbly looked to God:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

But things got harder. A few days of sitting around scraping his sores with clay shards while his friends scraped his character with harsh words... and Job got a tad defensive and a little arrogant. That's only one example of how hard it can be to endure troubles.

May the Lord give us grace!

But the endurance I want us to focus on most closely today is not the staying faithful through affliction and suffering. Rather the staying faithful through routine, through the non-eventful, even *boring* times in the life of a church.

The Devil has more than one trick in his bag. Sometimes he will try to fear you into sin, sometimes he will try to lure you into sin, and other times he will just sit back and let you drift into sin.

I wonder if Shem ever got bored? Every day, year after year hammering like a fool on that giant floating barn. Did he ever feel like giving up? Did he ever get tired of the smell of gopher wood? Did he ever question the whole project and say to Noah, “Dad, I'm tired of all this pitch under my nails! Ark schmark! Let's go to Disneyland!”

Or what of Methuselah? 969 years on earth! The average man works 1/3 of his life. If Methuselah retired at 69, he had to live off his RIF for 900 years! That must have been some good investing! Did he ever start to wonder, “What is this all about anyway?” “I'm 813 years old... let's see... what HAVEN'T I done?”

Or what of the 7 churches described in the Revelation to John? Most of them had pretty exciting starts! The Ephesian church began with a city riot, for example (Acts 19). But

they ran into trouble some 50 years later. Although they are commended for their endurance in *some* things, they had not endured in *all* things. They had not endured in their love for God. Now, why was that? I am not sure I know. But I've been married as long as Yonge St. and know that if a man is not deliberate, if he doesn't keep at the little things, the love he has for his wife will wane.

And I would bet a nickel to your dollar that the same is true in the life of a church. After a while, the same old things can seem... well, like the same old things. Another sermon, another prayer meeting, another lunch, another worship service. And if we are not careful, we'll begin to think of church like some Muslims think of their 32nd wife – not much at all!

Now the Lord in His grace may send along some hailstorm or earthquake to shake things up and wake things up – but I would rather stay at the course than have the Omnipotent flex his arm in order to get our attention!

So, here is my advice for not growing weary in doing good and staying faithful through the boring routine times in church life.

1. Take some time to thank the Lord for what is good.

Nothing brings a feeling of life like remembering how much you've been blessed. You stop taking it all for granted! It is no mistake that the happiest men are the most thankful – or should I say the most thankful men are the happiest. If you never give thanks to God for the routine things of church life, then you may have a deadly disease eating at your bones. *Destructia Ungratia*.

It begins with an ulcer-like feeling in your gut so that your eyes turn yellow-like and all you can see is the faults and failures of others. Even worse, your eyes make every other church you see look all green – like your neighbours grass! And you start to thinking that there is something wrong with everything at home. Well, there is. You. And the best way to improve any church is to improve yourself. But more on that later.

Learn to thank God for a steady diet of the Word and regular worship with his people. My 4-fingered Uncle used to say, "A man doesn't know how much he needs his pinky until he loses it in a combine." I'll take his word for it!

2. Be careful to avoid all those sneaky, easy sins.

The slightest noise will alert a sentry in the middle of war, but he'll sleep through the loud laugh of a drunken sailor in days of peace. When the dog days drag on, a church may grow tolerant of little sins... and that's a danger. For "little sins" is an oxymoron, like "Jumbo shrimp, or pretty ugly, or unbiased journalism."

So, we need to be diligent to put to death things like

- Gossip
- Pride
- Laziness
- Backsliding
- Strife
- The love of pleasure
- The envy of the wicked
- Chasing worthless pursuits

As Solomon wrote, the wicked will be found out (Proverb 10:7). Even though not much may seem to come from these misty disobediences at the time, they are breeding an avalanche of disaster around the bend. They are the kind of sins a man may grow tolerant of when things are good. He may even falsely interpret God's blessings on his life as a sign that the Lord approves of his sin! Beware of that hoogly! And run for Christ!

3. Redeem the time to grow in wisdom and knowledge

10:14 "The wise lay up knowledge..."

13:11 "Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it."

18:15 "An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge."

24:13 "My son, eat honey, for it is good,
and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste.

14 Know that wisdom is such to your soul;
if you find it, there will be a future,
and your hope will not be cut off."

A smart man will learn to get done now what he can't get done in difficult days.

Memorize the Word. Learn some hymns. When I was a boy we would read of Christians in Russia who had no Bible but the one in their memory. Such a thing may seem impossible today, but you never know.

You'd be wise to heed the words of Solomon.

24:27 "Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house."

27:23 "Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds, for riches do not last forever; and does a crown endure to all generations?"

The answer, of course, is that a man needs to look at the dog day as a time to get caught up and stored up. In a church, that means you ought to keep working away at the regular ministries and such and getting them more and more grounded and running well.

5. Think long-term integrity

16:31 “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”

20:7 “The righteous who walks in his integrity — blessed are his children after him!”

Just owning a barn and field doesn't make you a farmer. Just getting old doesn't give a man integrity. You gain integrity by staying upright through the valleys and trials of life. One of those trials can be the boredom of routine.

6. Decide to keep running when your stitches twang.

Most of us pull up short in a run when we get a stitch – a burn in the side of our gut. But I learned that a man can often run further than he thought. I have never been much for running. Leave that to the gazelles and geckos. But one day a section of fence broke and the cattle got out on the road.

Well, those cows were my mortgage – so I got to running after them. And there wasn't anybody around to help – so I ran and ran. Got the stitch and everything but just kept on running... until the last cow was back in the field. Then I laid down! Right there in the field with them!!

Friends, one day we will lay down to – but not here! It'll be in a perfect place where the Lord is.

Hebrews 12:1-4 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

Well, I think this letter was about as deep as a coat of paint. But I had one point to make: **Don't let routine lull you into sin or slackness.** You've got a mighty good thing going on down there, but I've been around the block enough times to know that its easy to stop watering and weeding, but a lot harder to find your cucumbers when you do.

The best remedy to getting off track in the middle is to keep your eyes looking ahead. Jesus had a word or three to say to the man who looked back. So, Walter says, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Remind one another pretty regularly about the price with which you

were bought and the One who paid it. Give lots of thanks. Run from sins. Redeem the time. Build integrity. And keep on running.

Who knows what tomorrow holds? So be faithful today.

Your Friend,

Walter

P.S. Thank everyone for the nice cards they sent urging me to write again... they'll probably ask for them back now. And somebody tell that fine Polish boy who I am!

By Pastor Paul W. Martin © Grace Fellowship Church

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