

Words to Live By in Times Such as These
ENDURANCE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A water bearer in India had two large pots, which hung on the ends of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. The other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house. But the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the water bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to the master's house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the water bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because of this crack in my side that causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," said the pot.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house today, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Sure enough, as they went up the hill on the way back to the master's house, the old cracked pot noticed the beautiful wildflowers on the side of the path. Their beauty made the pot feel a little better. However, when they reached the master's house, the pot was still discouraged because, once again, it had leaked out half its load. Once again, the cracked pot apologized to the water bearer.

The servant said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. Every day as we have walked back from the stream, you've watered the seeds. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."¹

In his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul wrote, "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. But we have this treasure [the gospel] in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Cor. 4:1, 7) If we are honest with God

and with ourselves, we will confess that we are all cracked pots (notice I didn't say "crackpots"!). However, as the story from India shows us, even cracked pots can serve a useful purpose and help to bring beauty and grace to this world.

Just before he writes about us being clay jars, Paul piles on the praises as he affirms, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6) What a beautiful idea — that God's light in our hearts can shine through our imperfections to bring beauty and grace to this world, and that God's light in Jesus Christ can shine through the cracks and give light to our hearts.

Because we are not perfect, because we have this ministry in an imperfect world, there will be times when we feel afflicted, perplexed, perhaps persecuted, and struck down. We get discouraged, we feel overwhelmed, we wonder "What's the use?", we question if our ministry and trying to live a faithful Christian life make a difference. But, Paul writes, because of God's mercy, because of the gospel treasure, because of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, because the extraordinary power belongs to God, "we are not crushed, we are not driven to despair, we are not forsaken, we are not destroyed." (2 Cor. 4:8-9)

The dictionary defines "endurance" as "the ability to do something difficult for a long time." Another word for "endurance" is "perseverance," "steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success." As part of The Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program, I read a book by Eugene Peterson called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Here are some thoughts I highlighted in his chapter on "Perseverance."

* "an apathetic, sluggish neutrality is death to perseverance and enervates the muscle of discipleship"

* Perseverance does not mean "perfection." It means that we keep going.

* Endurance is not a desperate hanging on, but a traveling from strength to strength.

* Perseverance is not the result of **our** determination, it is the result of God's faithfulness.

I particularly like that last thought. Just as Paul says, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us," so we can claim that endurance in the faith is not something we just decide to do on our own. It's not as if we wake up one morning and say, "I think I'll have more stick-to-itiveness starting today." No, our endurance and perseverance in the Christian life are rooted, first and foremost, in **God's** "stick-to-itiveness." Peterson says, "God sticks with us. He is always **there** for us. God sticks to his relationship, God stays with it."

Peterson also talks about "the organizing center of life." He says, "The Christian faith is the discovery of that center in the God who sticks with us, the righteous God. Christian discipleship is a decision to walk in his ways, steadily and firmly, and then finding that the way integrates all our interests, passions and gifts, our human needs and our eternal aspirations." Eugene Peterson is 83 years old. He was the founding

pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, and served there for twenty-nine years, until he retired. He certainly knows what it means to be afflicted, perplexed, struck down, perhaps even persecuted. Like Paul, he doesn't look at the world through rose-colored glasses, but is frank about the struggles in the Christian life. Yet, like Paul, Peterson sees reason for hope and finds help to endure the journey of faith. He writes, "There are endless challenges in [Christian discipleship] to keep us on the growing edge of faith; there is always the God who sticks with us to make it possible for us to persevere."²

When Dustin Ellington visited us a couple of weeks ago, he gave us an update on the work of the Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia. One of the main purposes of the school is to train pastors to serve in the Presbyterian and Reformed churches in southern Africa, where there is a critical need for pastors. Dustin shared with us one of the biggest challenges, the proliferation of the "prosperity gospel" in Africa — the message that Jesus Christ is the ticket to material wealth here on earth, the idea that the Christian life is one of constant blessing (especially in a material sense), the call to "believe in Jesus and all your problems will be wiped away."

Dustin is as realistic and hopeful about the Christian life as the apostle Paul and Eugene Peterson. Certainly the Christian life brings blessings. But the Christian life is not necessarily (or even primarily) a life of constant material blessings. In a newsletter which Dustin and Sherri sent last November, he wrote about the "prophets" or "powerful men of God" who travel around and announce blessings and prosperity. For example, a visiting "prophet" arrived from the impoverished neighboring country of Malawi on his private jet. He was escorted to the stadium by a military and police motorcade, where he supposedly worked miracles of healing and foretold the future. Another "prophet" promised everyone who came to the stadium that they would receive automatic deposits in their bank accounts.

Dustin contrasted this "prosperity gospel" with the story of Rev. Charles Jankens, a graduate of Justo Mwale, who is the pastor of eight congregations, the smallest of which has 1,600 members. Rev. Jankens rides his bicycle among his eight congregations in order to serve the people in the name of Jesus Christ. Dustin said this is a huge challenge facing the students who are graduating and going out to serve as pastors. According to Dustin, the church in Zambia has largely swallowed the idea that Jesus will make people rich in this life and many pastors and congregations market themselves with promises of wealth.

This "prosperity gospel" can have two very negative effects. First, it is being proclaimed to people who live in dire poverty and who would welcome such material blessings here on earth. However, almost none of them will experience blessings such as an automatic deposit in their bank account or a new car. That leads to the second negative implication, which Dustin describes this way: "If we find our life a mess, full of trouble and distress, then either we are living in sin and need to confess, or we are short on faith and need to renew it."

But life can be a mess, full of trouble and distress. Just by being a human being, you are guaranteed your share of suffering, challenges, and troubles. But when the apostle Paul wrote about the challenges of life, he was talking specifically about the troubles and challenges that might come your way **because** you are a Christian. Maybe you've never been shipwrecked or in prison or whipped because of your Christian faith, as Paul himself was many times. Nevertheless, trying to lead a faithful Christian life can have its own share of challenges, perplexities, and discouragements. The temptation is to despair and to shrug and wonder, "What's the use?" As Peterson says, it is an "apathetic, sluggish neutrality that is death to perseverance, and enervates the muscle of discipleship."

Paul writes, "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." Despite the setbacks, the challenges, the failures, the questions, the cracks in the clay jars, we do not lose heart, because "we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord." (2 Cor. 4:5)

Paul often used athletic imagery to describe the Christian life and journey of faith. He wrote to the Philippians about his desire to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . . but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14)

Toward the end of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy, his younger companion in ministry, and said, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

And, at the end of his great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians with these words about what difference Christ's resurrection makes in believers' lives today: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Cor. 15:58)

This sermon series on "Words to Live By in Times Such as These" began with the word FAITH and the story of Abraham, who obediently responded to God's call, went to a new and unknown land, and trusted God's promises, even though all of the circumstances in his life argued against the promises. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is the great roll call of the Old Testament heroes and heroines of the faith, "all of [whom] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance saw and greeted them." (Hebrews 11:13)

The 2016 Summer Olympics have come and gone. We were inspired by the amazing athletic achievements of the world's best athletes. We were also inspired by the stories of many athletes who did not set Olympic or world records or stand on the

podium to receive a medal. We were inspired by the two women runners who fell and then helped each other up and finished the race. We were inspired by athletes who represented their countries proudly and set personal records. The crowds in Olympic Stadium in Rio encouraged the runners in their sprints and long distance runs.

The letter to the Hebrews uses that same imagery to encourage us in our race of faith: “Since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Perhaps one of the greatest stories of endurance and perseverance comes from the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City. “At 7:00 p.m. on October 20, 1968, only a few thousand spectators remained in the Olympic Stadium in Mexico City. In the darkness the last of the men’s marathon runners was being carried off the track after completing the exhausting 26-mile, 385-yard run. The winner from Ethiopia had finished more than an hour earlier.

“As the spectators were getting ready to leave the stadium, the people sitting next to the gates where the marathon runners entered were startled to hear sirens going off and policemen blowing their whistles. Suddenly, a single runner entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari, from Tanzania. His leg was bandaged and bloody, because he had injured his knee in a fall. He hobbled around the final 400 meters and finished the marathon, the last competitor to do so.

“The crowd rose to its feet and the spectators applauded Akhwari as if he were the winner of the marathon. When he crossed the finish line, he walked off the field without even looking up at the cheering crowd. When John Stephen Akhwari was asked why he had not quit, since his task was so painful and he had no chance of winning a medal, he said, ‘My country did not send me 7,000 miles away to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it.’”³

My fellow cracked pots, since it is by God’s mercy that we are running this race of faith, let us never lose heart!

Let us pray: Guide our feet, O Lord, while we run this race; for we don’t want to run this race in vain. Amen.

NOTES

¹I received this story in an e-mail from my friend, Jose Perez, on February 10, 1999.

²All Peterson thoughts and quotes are from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000), pp. 130-134.

³Bud Greenspan, “The Greater Part of Glory,” *Parade Magazine*, April 21, 1991, p. 6.