

You Have Need of Endurance
Hebrews 10:32–39
April 21, 2024

I don't talk about my younger brother often, and I'm not thrilled about saying this publicly, but most people would say *he's* the superior athlete. Now, because I'm a couple years older, during *most* of our growing up years I had the advantage. However, by the time we entered high school, he'd caught up. And at our large public high school in Middle Tennessee, he was both the starting second baseman on the baseball team *and* the starting tailback on the football team. So, for mediocre reasons like that, most—if not *all*—people have concluded that he *was* the superior athlete.

Fast forward a couple decades. With the gentle nudge of middle age, I get into running. Then, out of the blue, a few years back my brother says he wants to come down and run the St. Jude half with me. And He did. I'll be gentle, but on that bless-ed Saturday morn, his nerdy older brother reopened the debate.

That was 5 or 6 years ago. All that is background for today's short story. There's a *lot* more, of course. To be clear, my brother's great. But like many brothers before us, we have a long history of athletic competition. And I just don't see it ending anytime soon.

Speaking of, after I annihilated him 5 or 6 years ago, last fall he told me he wanted to come run the 5k with Owen and me. Because it's the three of us running, we're stride for stride last December all through downtown Memphis, talking to one another, encouraging one another, really having a splendid time. The weather was crisp; the skies were clear. More than anything, it just seemed to be a nice collegial jog with two of my favorite humans.

But I'm guessing we're a quarter mile from the finish line at AutoZone Park when we take a right off Danny Thomas onto Union Avenue. Keep in mind that we've got a twelve-year-old with us, it's a 5k, and no one's confusing any Sliger with Carl Lewis. However, when we made that right turn, and the finish line came into view, something happened I did *not* see coming. My little brother—I guess sick of me holding the bragging rights—took off like he was shot out of a cannon. I'd let my guard down; he left me in the dust. *Even though* he knew what his calves would endure sprinting down Union—even though he knew the cost—once he saw the goal, he paid it gladly.

I've said in the past that the first John Piper book I ever read was *Future Grace*. Though it was a long time ago, I *still* have all the penciled in question marks in the margin. I just didn't think that meditating on future reward was a proper motivation for living the Christian life in the present. I don't know why I thought that back, but I strongly disagreed with Piper's premise for 200 pages.

But of course, I eventually realized it's not *just* Piper's premise. That motive is all over the Scriptures. Knowing the end—what's to come, what's promised—can and does enable endurance in the present. Jesus taught that way in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 18:29-30; 21:28). Paul endured suffering in the book of Acts, in part, *because* of his unshakeable hope (Acts 24:15; 28:20). Peter instructs the first-century church to live holy lives in the midst of persecution by fixing their **hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ** (1 Peter 1:13). And of course, this forward-looking posture is all over the Psalms.

And we'll see it throughout Hebrews 11 in the weeks ahead. What is faith? It's the assurance of things *hoped* for. *That* kind of hope-filled faith has marked believers for centuries. Moses, for example, endured ill-treatment and the reproach of Christ, **for he was looking to the reward** (Heb. 11:26).

Our passage today is something of an introduction to that well-known chapter. And as it instructs these suffering believers concerning endurance, it does so with the same forward-looking focus. Knowing the end enables endurance. Note first:

1. You have endured (vv. 32–34)

Verse 32: **But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings.** After last week’s sobering passage on future judgment, one might wonder if today’s text is going to be part deux. And the answer is that it *is*, but in the way that Hebrews 6 already showed us a part two. If you recall, back in Hebrews 6 the author sternly warned the readers, telling them that they *dare* not go on their continued drifting. They couldn’t *go on* rejecting what Christ had done and assume they could just repent whenever they wanted to. Because you can’t reject and repent at the same time.

So, in that chapter the author warns them sternly, not unlike last week’s sobering text. Yet *after* doing so, right on the heels of that warning, he wrote in Hebrews 6:9: **But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation.** “But, beloved,” is the clear transition back in chapter 6. That’s *also* the sense of the conjunction at the beginning of verse 32, a transition. And like it was then, it’s a transition from stern warning to encouragement.¹

So, on the heels of a passage that said, **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God** (v. 31), how might he *encourage* them to endure? Verse 32: **But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings.**

Before he looks forward, which he will do *repeatedly* in this passage, the author actually looks *backward*. We’ve said before that we will often struggle to understand—or live rightly in—our *present* without looking both at past *and* future. This text agrees.

But this isn’t necessarily like what we’ve seen in Psalm 77, when the Psalmist looks back at something he *didn’t* experience—the Exodus. Nor is what they’re being commanded to remember mere nostalgia. One of the verses in Ecclesiastes that sticks with me is when the Preacher said, **Do not say, “why is it that the former days were better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this** (Eccl. 7:10). This verse isn’t nostalgia, considering better days; *nor* is it drawing on the experience of others. It’s drawing on what these readers endured *themselves*. After they’d been converted—**enlightened**—they **endured a great conflict of sufferings**.

Now, if we’re going to talk about endurance in all three points today, it might be worth clarifying what endurance is. Sometimes when two smaller words are combined into one word, they *don’t* mean what the two words mean. As an example, a butterfly might *fly*, but *butter* has nothing to do with it. However, when the construction of a word—two smaller words being slammed together—is confirmed by the context, we can assume the make-up matters more.² The word for endurance is the combination of two words in the original, the word for “remain,” and “under.”³ And isn’t that what endurance is? A *staying* power, a remaining under?

They remained under—*endured*—**a great conflict of sufferings**. By the way, one of the reasons I began this sermon the way I did is because this “great conflict” language was used to describe the pressures of athletic events.⁴ It would be to press on in this or that activity—to remain under—in light of a future goal. That’s why *anyone* laces up their shoes and hits the trail. To embrace the pain, they have to believe it accomplishes something. This athletic imagery will return later in Hebrews 12, as you well know.

¹ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 288.

² See Doug Moo on James 1, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 74; Chris Vlachos, *James*, EGGNT, 19, and <https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/when-trust-word%E2%80%99s-etymology-1-tim-1-3>

³ υπομενω is υπο (meaning, under) + μενω (to remain)

⁴ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 331; Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 497; Harris, 289.

They endured a great conflict of sufferings. What did these sufferings entail? Verse 33 answers: **partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property.** I don't think there's a section in Hebrews that tells us *more* about what these believers faced than these two verses. First, the "partly" language means they endured *both* things noted here.⁵ They endured being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations *and* they supported other believers undergoing the same thing. In other words: they suffered; and they suffered *together*.

First, note the reproaches. Keep in mind that following Christ had the effect of alienating these Jewish Christians from nearly everyone. On the one hand, those they'd grown up around, celebrated holidays with—the Jewish people—were likely tired of them saying that Isaiah 53 was about Jesus, or that they'd found a better High Priest. On the other hand, their non-Jewish neighbors—the pagans that dotted the landscape—likely grew tired of them not participating in the worship of idols and all the other immoral practices that society revolved around.⁶

Maybe you can imagine, maybe it's *not* hard to imagine, what it would be like to be marginalized because you don't do that particular thing after work—or on the weekends—or maybe because you *do* this other thing. Maybe you can imagine, maybe it's *not* hard to imagine, what it would be like to be marginalized because of the way you parent, the way you spend your money, the way you love your spouse.

So, to start on the less excessive end, they endured **reproaches**, which likely involved verbal abuse.⁷ But let's not assume, even on this seemingly lesser end, that this was minor. The verse says they were made a **public spectacle**. In our day, much of the time it's people talking behind our back. But there are no guarantees it will *always* be that way. They were derided in a public fashion. Shamed. The author calls these reproaches part of the **great conflict of sufferings** (v. 32).

And what seems to be an *even more* excessive aspect of this great conflict, the end of verse 34 says they **accepted joyfully the seizure of your property**. That phrase isn't describing the klepto tree trimmer "borrowing" a tool or two from your closet. The "seizure" of property implies some measure of violent taking, either by a hostile mob and/or by the judicial action of civic officials.⁸ So, the persecution we're talking about, the **great conflict of sufferings** these Jewish Christians faced, wasn't disorganized and mild-mannered. At times what rose up *against* these believers was power itself, either led or followed by a mob of angry sinners. It's not unlike those things the Apostle Paul endured in places like Ephesus.

With that in mind, it's easy to see why the anger of mobs mixed with organized power against them might be described as **tribulations**, the other word in verse 33, which seems to have included both physical abuse and imprisonment.⁹ Through *all* this, in reproaches and tribulations, in the seizure of their property, even in imprisonment, they were made a public spectacle.

It's worth asking: is *this* what the author of Hebrews commands them to remember? Yes, it is. But not *only* that this happened to *them*, but also that they became **sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners.** There's a masterful section in *Grapes of Wrath* when Steinbeck describes what helped those that lost their land during the dust bowl in

⁵ Cockerill, 499; Harris, 289.

⁶ Cockerill, 500.

⁷ Schreiner, 331.

⁸ Cockerill, 501.

⁹ Harris, 290; Cockerill, 499.

Oklahoma. He writes that eventually “I lost my land” became “We lost our land,” and “I have a little food,” joined with “I have no food,” became “We have a little food.”¹⁰

The author of Hebrews wants them to remember that what they endured they didn’t endure *alone*. That not only means that when *they* suffered, others came alongside *them*, it means that when *others* suffered, they didn’t stay at arm’s length either. Instead, they sympathized with one another.

If you recall Hebrews 4, though we might use “sympathy” in our day as *merely* describing a feeling, it didn’t mean that in this era. The word itself actually means to “suffer with.”¹¹ And in that era, *unlike* our own, it *always* included the element of active help.¹² It’s a “suffering with” that leads to active assistance.¹³

They suffered. But they didn’t endure that suffering alone. That’s *some* of what the author wants them to remember. But what’s remarkable about these verses is not *primarily* what happened, but their response to it. Verse 34 says they **accepted joyfully the seizure of your property**. *How* did they do this? How did they suffer—shamed and stolen from—with joy? Simply, there was something they all knew,¹⁴ **knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one**.

So, what’s happening in these verses? What is the author asking them to remember? He instructs them to remember not *only* that they endured in the past, but also *how* they endured in the past. *How* had they done so? By looking *forward*, to that which is better, to that which would last. In the past, their past, looking forward had enabled endurance, even endurance with joy.

Though most likely we’ve never faced what they have—at least to that degree—I imagine you could meditate for a few minutes on something you’ve endured. What trial, difficulty, or suffering has the Lord helped you endure? One of the benefits of looking *back* on those experiences—especially one from years and years ago—is that you can say, “Well, it was hard, but I made it,” or to say it better, “He helped me endure.” Another benefit of looking back in this way is the benefit of saying, “I was able to endure that trial because of *this*, or because of *this*.”

These believers *had* endured those temporary tribulations because they knew something better and more lasting awaited them. And in *these* moments, the author commands them to remember that time they endured.

Why? Because they needed endurance again.

2. You need endurance (vv. 35–38)

That’s what verse 35 says: **Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance**. Though they *had* endured, they *still* needed endurance.

Reflecting on past difficulties can bring about a helpful perspective for the present. It’s generally—though not in *all* cases—easier to look back on something you faced ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. At this point, you can see the outcome better. That gives you a measure of perspective. And maybe, at one point or another, you’ve wished you could go back and tell that version of you all the things that would enable endurance in that particular season.

That could be one reason the author of Hebrews tells them to remember their past endurance. We’re quick to forget that which we *have* endured, or again to say it better, those

¹⁰ John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 151.

¹¹ Συμπάθεω (sympatheō): patheō = suffer; sym = with.

¹² William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, WBC, 114.

¹³ Cockerill, 225.

¹⁴ All the verbs in these verses are plural.

circumstances the Lord has carried us through. Further, and more importantly, we're quick to forget *how* He helped us endure those things.

That's something of the **therefore** in verse 35. Verses 32–34 detailed *past* sufferings as well as *how* they endured them. Then verse 35 declares: **Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.** In the midst of great suffering, they'd *been* confident concerning what was *to come*. The author reminds them, in essence, you've *known* this. Know it *again*.

Because, once again, in these moments, they **have need of endurance**. *How* might they be helped to endure this time? The same way they were *then*. Verse 36 goes on: **For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.** He points, yet again, to that which is *future*, reminding them of what's been promised.

One of the clearer passages concerning these promises occurred back in Hebrews 6, *right* after that warning I've mentioned. The author was convinced of **better things concerning you** (Heb. 6:9) better things which were based on promises God made. He goes on in that chapter to admonish these believers to be **imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises** (Heb. 6:12).¹⁵ What verse 36 of our passage says is that, *like* them, so might we: **when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.**

And *that* assurance, not unlike seemingly *every other* assertion made in the book of Hebrews, has a scriptural basis.¹⁶ The author quotes here from Habakkuk 2. And what is he encouraging those hearing to do? Again, to look forward: **For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come** (v. 37). In Habakkuk this verse is less obviously person-oriented, often translated as **it will certainly come**. But Hebrews takes that "it" and makes it clearly a "He," emphasizing something of a Messianic title.¹⁷ In a very little while, He, "the Coming One" will indeed come; *He* will not delay.

As we're looking forward, we're not merely looking at events, nor are we merely looking to relief. Primarily, what might help them endure? Or *Whom*? To use the language of Psalm 123: **To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens.** Or, not to get ahead of ourselves too much, but to consider where Hebrews 11 will lead, **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith** (Heb. 12:1–2).

The author of Hebrews is brilliantly and slowly building to that admonition. He's made the case—clearly and compellingly—that Jesus is better. Along the way, he's warned us against drifting. And he's telling us that if we want to endure, there's One to whom we must look. He's the One who's seated on the throne, **waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet** (Heb. 10:13). He, the Coming One, will indeed come; and His enemies will indeed bow. If that's ahead, why would we turn back?

We don't see this just yet. So, to look forward, to look toward His coming, is an ongoing act of faith. That's what Habakkuk said, and it's what Hebrews echoes in verse 38: **But my righteous one shall live by faith.** Maybe you're aware that Paul quotes this verse in Romans 1 to speak of justification. Maybe we're *less* aware that the author of *this* book uses it to introduce Hebrews 11. The one that belongs to God, God says, **My righteous one**, he or she *shall live*—in an ongoing way—by faith.

¹⁵ That's serious foreshadowing for Hebrews 11.

¹⁶ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 555.

¹⁷ Harris, 293; "Hebrews turns the participle in Hab. 2:3 into a masculine substantival participle to clarify that Jesus himself is coming," Schreiner, 334.

Habakkuk 2 speaks *both* truths. The faith that saves—Romans 1—is a faith that perseveres—Hebrews 11.¹⁸ And it’s with *that* kind of faith, we *keep* believing the promises, we *keep* drawing near, and *keep* looking to the One to come.

So, the author instructs them to remember *how* they’d endured in the past. They’d endured *then*, knowing they had a better possession, a lasting one. And in these more recent moments, they needed endurance again. So, *how* would they endure? The same way. Considering the reward (v. 35), to receive what was promised (v. 36), knowing He who is coming will come (v. 37), and living by that faith (v. 38). They had endured. They needed endurance. Knowing the end would enable it.

3. You will endure (v. 39)

The end of verse 39 speaks of the alternative, the other side of the statement, “The faith that saves is a faith that perseveres.” The faith that *doesn’t* persevere, **that goes on sinning willfully**¹⁹—*that* faith, temporary and fleeting—is *not* saving faith. Verse 39 continues to quote Habakkuk, who of course quoted the Lord, who’d warned, **if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in Him**. So, in case we’ve forgotten last week’s sobering truths, this is yet another brief warning.

However, as he was in chapter 6, the author is convinced of *better* things concerning those he wrote, things concerning salvation (Heb. 6:9). In fact, with certainty he pens verse 39: **But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction**. With emphasis—in other words, **bolded and underlined**²⁰—he writes that we ourselves are *not* the sort of people²¹ that cease believing.

There’s evidence of this, in fact. Remember the former days when **you endured a great conflict of sufferings** (10:32). What did you do *then*? You accepted joyfully the seizure of your property. How? By **knowing you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one** (10:34).

You’ve endured. You will continue to. Because those Christ purchased by His blood, He *also* cleansed *so that* they might go on to serve the living God (9:14). And those who have been called by Him do **receive the promise of the eternal inheritance** (9:15). Because those whom He intercedes for are a people for whom He intercedes forever (7:25).

Those people are *not* the sort of people that shrink back. In fact, verse 39 ends describing what sort of people they are: **but (we are) of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul**.

We persevere. He preserves.

Conclusion

If you could go back to this or that difficulty you endured a decade or more ago, knowing the outcome *now*, what might you say to that version of yourself? Knowing you’d make it, even knowing how the Lord might use that suffering, how would you encourage yourself to endure, to continue exercising faith in Christ?

With that in mind, fast forward to today. Whatever is in your present, what do you wish someone else—someone with more knowledge or wisdom—might say to you? What would help you press on?

¹⁸ Schreiner, 335.

¹⁹ (rejecting Christ continuously)

²⁰ The language is doubly emphatic.

²¹ Harris, 295.

In these last days God has spoken to us in His Son. And to those He purchased, to those He intercedes for, He declares: Remember, you *have* endured. You still *need* endurance. But know this: you *will* endure.