

## **THE VIRTUE OF ENDURANCE**

2 Peter 1:1-8

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### **SCRIPTURE**

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup>May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup>Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup>For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1-8 NRSV).

### **INTRODUCTION**

Years ago the Milwaukee Braves and the Cincinnati Reds played each other in a game that featured a rookie from each team making his major-league baseball debut. The rookie who played for the Reds hit four doubles and helped his team win the game. The rookie for the Braves went 0 for 5. The Reds player was Jim Greengrass, a name you probably have not heard. The other rookie, who did not get a hit, might be more familiar to you. His name was Hank Aaron, the player who went on to break Babe Ruth's record for most career home runs, and become one of the greatest baseball players of all time. It just goes to show you, it is not how you start but how you finish.

This can be true of sports but it is especially true of life. If you want to be remembered as a good person then it is not how you start out in life but how you complete it that matters. To live as a good person requires the development of good character. Character is not based on good intentions but is formed through repeated actions. Anybody can be honest for ten minutes. But to be an honest person requires telling the truth consistently and repeatedly over time. Positive character traits that are developed over time are called virtues.

### **1. CARDINAL VIRTUES**

The ancient Greeks valued virtues not only because they benefit the individual who

practices them but also because, and especially because, they benefit the society in which such individuals are found. Four virtues in particular were designated as being essential to individual happiness and the welfare of society: Moderation, Prudence, Justice, and Fortitude. These four were also accepted by many Jewish teachers and can be found in the apocryphal<sup>1</sup> book known as *The Wisdom of Solomon* (see *Wisdom 8:7*) written somewhere around the second century before the birth of Jesus. These same virtues were later embraced by well known Christian leaders such as Ambrose, Augustine and Aquinas. They called them the “Cardinal Virtues.”

If I asked you to picture a cardinal in your mind, many of you would have an image of a red bird by that name common to Michigan. The bird is named after a certain kind of church leader known for wearing red garments. But a church cardinal is not called a cardinal because he wears red garments. Rather he wears red garments because he is a cardinal.

The word “cardinal” is from the Latin word for hinge. It was a metaphor for a person or object considered essential. Certain church leaders were regarded as essential for the health of a particular congregation. Just as a hinge is necessary for the operation of a door, these leaders were regarded as necessary for the mission of a particular church. Over time, these “cardinals” were granted greater authority. They took up the practice of wearing blood-like red garments to symbolize their willingness to die for their faith. In like manner, a cardinal virtue would be a virtue considered so important that it is worth dying for.

## **2. LIVING FOR FAITH**

The Apostle Peter, in his writings in the New Testament, does not dismiss the so-called cardinal virtues nor do I think he would deny that virtue can benefit individuals and society. But he has a different end in sight. He is not trying to encourage us to die for our faith as much as he is trying to get us to live for our faith. He is more interested in virtues he thinks will help us live a Christ-like life. So he provides us a list of seven virtues in order to help us do just that. Each one is worthy of our attention but I am going to be focusing this morning on endurance.

For Peter, living a virtuous life is evidence that we have been redeemed by God. It is a way of expressing our thanks to God for what God has done for us. It is a way of making our lives available for God’s purposes, not just one time, or for one day, but everyday. And so he says:

“Make every effort to support your faith with...endurance” (6).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wisdom of Solomon* is considered a Deuterocanonical book by the Roman Catholic Church and the Anagignoskomena in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Most Protestants consider it part of the Apocrypha and thus not a biblical book.

### **3. FOURTH VIRTUE: ENDURANCE**

The fourth of the seven virtues" is endurance. Some translations use the word "perseverance." The word persevere comes from the prefix *per*, meaning through, coupled with the word *severe*. It means to keep pressing on, trusting God, looking up, doing our duty—even through severe circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Perseverance. Question: How did the snail reach Noah's ark. Answer: Perseverance.<sup>3</sup>

Other translators of our Scripture text use "patience." Charles Staggs and Warren Knox describe patience this way: Patience is an admirable quality in the driver behind you but impossible to understand in the one ahead of you.<sup>4</sup>

We need patience. The lack of patience can deny us many benefits.

A sales rep, a clerk, and their manager are on the way to lunch when they find an antique oil lamp on the side of the road. They rub the lamp and a Genie appears. "Thank you for releasing me!" exclaims the Genie, "I will grant each of you a wish." "Me first! Me first!" says the clerk, "I want to be in the Bahamas, driving a speedboat, without a care in the world." Poof! The clerk is gone. Me next! Me next!" shouts the sales rep, "I want to be in Hawaii, relaxing on the beach with an endless supply of Pina Colodas." Poof! The sales rep is gone. "OK, your turn," says the Genie to the manager. The manager says, "I want those two back in the office right after lunch." Moral of the story: Always let your boss go first or, to put it another way, patience is a virtue!

Endurance means patience with a hope, perseverance with a forward look. It is the ability to hold fast to one's spiritual values in spite of temptation, hardship or even persecution because of the promise of better times ahead. The author of Hebrews uses the same basic word that Peter uses and says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud 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 (Heb 12:1-2 NRSV).

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<sup>2</sup>Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* (electronic ed., p. 610). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> "By perseverance the snail reached the ark." —Charles Spurgeon.

<sup>4</sup>"A Collection of Sense and Nonsense," *The Rotarian*, July 1994, p. 56.

Please understand that suffering for suffering's sake is not a virtue. If you have the opportunity to make a positive change for yourself or others then do so. But sometimes there is little we can do to change our immediate circumstances and at such times we need to look to Christ.

Christ understands what we go through in life. He knows our sufferings. As the prophet says, "He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3). It is in the suffering of Jesus that we see suffering in a whole new light. Jesus never promised anyone a trouble-free life. He spoke plainly about affliction, hardship even persecution. He also spoke plainly about forgiveness, friendship with God and eternal life. Jesus said:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NIV).

As followers of Christ we have hope. Christ endured the cross, died, but lives again. So it shall be for those who die in the Lord. God will bring them with him. Jesus said to Martha:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25 NRSV).

Death is not the last word. Christ has the last word. He has conquered sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life. This is the ultimate hope that enables us to endure to the end, to finish well, and to live for God day-by-day. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of Romans 5:

There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit! (Rom 5:3-5 MSG).

#### **4. APPLICATION**

In order to develop endurance we need to check our attitude. One way to do that is to answer the question:

When you face tough times do you want God to take you forward or back?

The normal human reaction to adversity is to want to go back. We want to go back to the

way things were before the tough times arrived. But even apart from the fact we can never go back, having the attitude that we must go back keeps us from being available for God's purposes here and now. The antidote to that is to ask God to take us forward.

A key promise we need to hold on to is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor 10:13 NRSV).

The immediate context for this passage is moral temptation, though the principle could apply to any challenge to faith. Paul is trying to teach the Corinthian Christians that with God's help there is always a way to avoid giving in to temptation. This does not mean, however, that things will go easier. Your hardship may actually increase because you did not give in to temptation. Yes, there is a way out but it is neither surrender nor retreat. The way out is forward in the grace and power of God. You can endure whatever comes if you go forward in hope. As the Apostle tells us:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-35, 37-39 NRSV).