Endurance is what pushes the athlete to achieve the next level. It’s what keeps the explorer trudging upward over the next mountain range. And endurance is what enables those who are suffering to face another setback, to take one more painful step forward, and to do so without losing heart.

From a very early age, I have had a deep, inner drive to succeed, to conquer whatever challenge comes my way. It is as if the passion to endure was woven through the very fiber of my being. When I was a young kid playing basketball and my friends wanted to quit, I’d be the one to say, “No. Let’s do one more game.” I wanted to see if I could play one more game without losing any speed, strength, or accuracy.

As bizarre as it may seem, I liked sweating more, I liked feeling the pain. It was fun! Enduring the process of intense competition was part of who I was. It was second nature to me.

The drive to endure served me well on the road to becoming a professional athlete. It also served me well when I was first diagnosed with cancer and was told that outside of a miracle I would never pitch again. My response was to try to do the impossible. When I started rehab, I didn’t know how much I would have to endure in order to get to a place where I could even stand on the mound and throw a baseball, much less pitch at the major league level. But I loved the challenge of the process and taking on that physical challenge came very naturally to me.

It has been much more difficult for me to endure on the emotional and spiritual levels. Emotional and spiritual endurance has almost seemed unnatural to me. Yet, our emotional or spiritual condition can destroy us just as surely as our physical condition can, so I had to endure on those levels as well.

I had to learn to endure emotionally because there were many times when I hit the wall, when my arm didn’t respond as I hoped it would. During those times the question, “Do you want to quit?” nagged in the back of my mind. Yet I kept moving forward because I knew the process wasn’t complete. At the same time, I realized that if my arm didn’t respond, I would have to seriously consider if God wanted me to go in a different direction. From an emotional standpoint, that was very difficult because I love baseball so much and wanted to continue playing.
From a spiritual standpoint, that rehab period was a challenge. I became so preoccupied with the idea of coming back, so focused on playing baseball, that I had no energy left for spiritual endurance. Even though I knew God was with me, there were many times when I felt disconnected from Him and didn’t feel like praying. There were many times when I didn’t feel or experience His presence, but I had to keep reminding myself of what I knew to be true. I had to accept the truth that He was with me regardless of how I felt. The challenge for me was to stay with God, to believe Him and not walk away from Him.

It was so much easier for me to be challenged physically than it was to be challenged emotionally and spiritually. I think part of my difficulty was that from a spiritual and emotional standpoint, I had no clear goals. Physically, I was trying to reach a specific goal that was out there to be accomplished and then put to rest. All I was trying to do emotionally and spiritually was survive. There was no measurable emotional or spiritual mark that I was trying to reach. So there was a distinct difference between the physical and the emotional and spiritual pursuits.

The challenge of spiritual endurance was (is) to keep my eyes on Him, regardless of what’s going on around me. That is a life-long endurance. So from the spiritual perspective I’m running a marathon, not a sprint. It doesn’t matter who you are, you don’t run a marathon without at some point hitting the wall, without having to choose whether or not you will endure and continue the race.

The greatest challenge to my spiritual endurance came not during my rehab, not when my arm broke while I was pitching in Montreal, not in November of 1989 when I announced my retirement from baseball. It came when my arm was amputated, when the thing that brought me the greatest joy was removed from me. That’s when I hit rock bottom. I had no left arm. I no longer could be a left-handed pitcher. So who was I? I wrestled with my value as a father and a husband. I questioned what I had to give. I came face to face with me. That led to a crisis of faith during which I wondered if I really believed what I had said I believed.

At that point I had two choices, and I think everyone has the same two choices. The first choice was to turn my back on the challenges and give up. The other option was to face those issues head on and trust that God would help me endure whatever was ahead in my life. I could either walk in self pity or move forward and see what God had in store.

For me, the critical choice I needed to make was to believe that God was with me on this journey. Even though the struggle I was enduring was still confusing, even though I still had unanswered questions, even though I was still fearful and doubtful, I made the conscious choice to remember and live out what I believed about God regardless of my feelings or circumstances. Armed with that truth, I could come face to face with who I was. It was then, and only then, that I began to move forward and experience the strength God gives us to endure.

Once I chose to face life’s challenges head on and believe that God was with me on the journey, there were two key things that helped me endure. First, I realized that as much as I would like to, I could not endure on my own. Second, I discovered that God’s grace is an incredible fuel for endurance.

The journey becomes extremely lonely and difficult when we try to do it alone. It’s a tremendous encouragement when somebody comes alongside and says, “Gosh, I know you’re tired and exhausted, let me pray for you.” So many times Jan would say, “If you’re too tired to read the Bible, I’ll read it to you.” Even now there are times when I feel really bummed about being an amputee. It is such an encouragement when someone says, “I see you struggling, may I help you put your luggage in the overhead bin?” It’s also important to have a person with whom you have a safe enough relationship that he or she can give you a loving kick in the rear when you need it! As hard as it has been to accept, I can’t tell you how many times Jan has given me a much-needed swift kick that has challenged me to move forward again.

It is personal interaction such as this—the gentle touch and the swift kick—that helps move me forward, out of my frustration. It can come only from someone tangible—someone you can touch, feel, and see. When someone reaches out to me, I experience the awesome gift of God’s expression of love toward me.

Second, God’s grace is an incredible source of fuel for endurance. C.S. Lewis says, “If we have only the will to walk, then God is pleased with our stumbling.” This means that even though I mess up, even though I don’t know how to deal with pain and suffering, and even though I struggle with all the issues life throws at me, God still can be pleased with me. Sometimes we are so sick and tired of stumbling that we don’t want to walk anymore. What a blessing it is to realize that all we need to have is the will to walk with Him, and God is pleased with us—even when we stumble. That’s an incredible expression of grace. That is a tremendous motivation to endure.

When we run smack into the hardships of life, we either run away or take our stand. We either choose to go to God in anger or go to God for help. When we choose to fix our eyes on Him and trust Him for the strength to move forward, we are able to endure.
Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles…

HEBREWS 12:1

D

istance runners have refined the idea of traveling light almost to the ridiculous. When buying new running shoes, committed runners sometimes weigh the shoes to find the lightest pair. They wear the lightest clothing possible and may run without underwear (what would their mothers say?). While other people spend good money to have a full, thick head of hair, runners often shave their heads in the hope of shaving a few seconds off their best time. They usually don’t wear jewelry, not even wedding rings. They don’t wear anything that isn’t absolutely essential to the act of running. What possesses them to take such extreme measures? If you can catch them, they’ll tell you it’s nothing more than a thin ribbon strung across the track, trail, or road—the finish line.

You may not be a running enthusiast. You may never consider the weight of your clothing unless you’re standing on a scale at the doctor’s office. Although we may not share their enthusiasm for pavement pounding, we can learn some practical lessons from our running friends.

Runners understand that getting to the finish line requires endurance, and endurance requires simplicity. Can you imagine a runner wearing hiking boots in a race or pulling a wagonload of running accessories harnessed to his torso? Of course not! But when our trials take on marathon dimensions, we often do the physical and emotional equivalent. We try desperately not to alter any aspect of life. We try to go about business as usual. Unless we’re forced to, we rarely think of becoming a lean, mean, endurance machine. Yet if we are to endure when hardship strikes, we need to learn to travel light. We need to throw off any hindrances and discard all entanglements.

After her mother had cardiac bypass surgery, Kristen came up with a great idea. She and her siblings would hire a housekeeper to help their mother. In addition to paying her share, Kristen collected the money from her four siblings and paid the housekeeper. The arrangement was simple and convenient until Kristen’s husband was diagnosed with lung cancer. Then her act of kindness became just one more responsibility on an ever-growing list.

Like many others whose lives take an unexpected turn down the road of adversity, Kristen needed to consider all of her responsibilities and decide which ones were absolutely necessary and which ones could be delegated to others or eliminated. The problem wasn’t in the merit or value of the responsibility, it was in who was carrying it. Any one of her siblings could, and eventually did, take over the responsibility, which lightened Kristen’s load.

At first, Kristen was uncomfortable with the solution. Like most of us, she didn’t like feeling inadequate or incapable of taking care of everyday, normal tasks. But with the help of her sisters and friends, she realized that her primary responsibility was the care of her husband and children. She needed to eliminate any perceived responsibilities that hindered her ability to meet the most important ones.

Linda, too, needed to lighten the load she was carrying. When complications from her best friend’s cancer took a serious turn, Linda’s weekly 150-mile round trip to her friend’s home became an every-other-day marathon. She had a family of her own and a job that required the oversight of nearly 80 volunteers, so she couldn’t just drop out of sight for days at a time. Her solution was to hit the freeway to her friend’s house every other day after work while eating dinner in the car and dictating instructions to her volunteers.

An admitted over-achiever, Linda struggled because she wasn’t meeting everyone’s needs—and the needs she did meet, she met poorly. She began to pray for God to give her wisdom so that she could better juggle the multiple demands. God answered her prayer, but He didn’t make her a better juggler. Instead, He revealed the motives behind her amazing juggling act. Linda felt loved and accepted only when she pleased others. She didn’t really believe that anyone, especially God, could love her unconditionally. Like so many of us, Linda was entangled in the sin of people pleasing. When Linda turned to God for help, God didn’t change the circumstances. He changed Linda. In time, Linda learned to scale back her work responsibilities to only those she felt God wanted her to fulfill.

We will face seasons of adversity that require endurance. During those difficult times, God will, if we allow Him, reveal our wounds and weaknesses. Although that process will be painful, the end result can be a healthier soul and a much lighter load to carry.

Lord Jesus,

As I look at my situation, I am absolutely overwhelmed. I know I need to simplify my life but I don’t know how. Please give me your wisdom so I can see where I’m carrying unnecessary burdens and responsibilities. Show me any areas of sin that entangle me and cause even greater pain than I’m already experiencing. Give me Your strength to carry what I must and Your grace to help me do it in a way that honors You. Amen
Running with perseverance sounds easy: put one foot in front of the other and keep going. But any distance runner or person who has endured adversity for any length of time will tell you it’s not that easy. You run out of energy, there are obstacles on the track, you lose the desire to run, and it’s lonely. So how do you keep going when the course gets difficult? We tapped the expertise of some long-distance runners to come up with four strategies for persevering when the race gets long.

**Consume the Right Fuel**
Runners know what their body needs for optimal performance. They eat protein bars, not candy bars. They drink Gatorade, not soda pop. We can take a cue from them and learn what fuel best meets our emotional and spiritual needs over the long haul. Romans 15:4 gives us wonderful insight: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.” The Scriptures supply the fuel for endurance.

The day before Dave’s amputation, Jan was at home, overwhelmed with anxiety and exhausted from Dave’s two-year cancer battle and her battle with depression. The phone rang and she answered yet another distressing call. The caller, like most of the others, was convinced that Dave’s amputation was unnecessary. Then came a knock at the door. This time the same message was delivered by a total stranger. He was convinced that God did not intend for His children to suffer because Scripture says God will heal all of our diseases. He was certain that if Dave and Jan just had more faith, Dave would be healed.

Jan dismissed the young man and fell to her knees, dropping her Bible to the floor. “God, this can’t be this hard,” she pleaded. “I am so confused. People tell me one thing, but our experience tells me something else. Help me understand your purpose in our suffering.”

When she finished praying, Jan noticed that her Bible had fallen open to Hebrews 12. “I’ve never been the type of person who just opens the Bible expecting God to speak. I was shocked when what I read exactly described what Dave and I were experiencing. That Scripture was exactly what I needed. It addressed hardship and how we were to endure it. It confirmed the journey we were on and gave me the clarity I needed. God encouraged me and gave me hope, even as I faced Dave’s amputation the next day—and it came from His Word.”

The Word of God is more than ink on paper. Hebrews 4:12 tells us it is alive. God speaks to us, changes us, and encourages us through it.

**Anticipate Obstacles**
Terry knew it was coming, and she dreaded it. The final two kilometers were uphill—not a steep hill, just a gradual, unrelenting climb. And Terry’s knees didn’t like hills. In geographical terms, it was just a hill. Psychologically, it was a mountain. Terry knew she needed a strategy in order to face this stretch of the race successfully.

Terry talked with running friends and sought medical advice about strengthening her knees. She did practice runs on the hills near her home. She asked a friend to stand on the sidelines halfway up the hill, just at the point where Terry knew her legs would start feeling like anchors and her knees would burn. Her friend would cheer her on and have a cold water bottle waiting. Terry was ready to face her obstacle.

Beve’s obstacle was more than a hill. To her, it was Mt. Everest. Every visit to the oncologist’s office, even for a “routine” appointment, was a nightmare. The week prior to the appointment, she couldn’t sleep. Then the panic attacks began. By appointment day, she was nearly hysterical. The doctor’s waiting room felt like a prison. By the time she saw the doctor, she was so nauseated all she could think about was how quickly she could get out of the exam room and into the bathroom. She couldn’t remember the questions she wanted to ask or what her doctor told her. Beve needed a strategy, so she sat down with her husband and a close friend and they formed one.

The plan started with a call from home to her doctor. She shared honestly about the anxiety she felt before every appointment. Her doctor agreed to call several days in advance of each appointment just to ease her fears and establish communication about the visit. The doctor also gave her anti-anxiety medication to take when needed. On appointment day, her husband took time off work so she wouldn’t be alone. Her friend met them at the doctor’s office and the three of them sat together in the waiting room. To top it off, they agreed to plan a surprise outing for Beve after each visit. They went to her favorite restaurants, craft stores, and flower shops. The strategy worked so well that every time Beve faced an obstacle in her cancer battle, she would sit down with her team and together they would look for solutions.

**Hang Out with Other Runners**
Only runners can fully understand the exhilaration and the pain of their sport.
Non-runners can't relate to the pain of shin splints or the surreal experience of "hitting the wall," the physical sensation in which their brain feels disconnected from their body. Likewise, when we are in a daily battle for survival, those whose lives are unchallenged by adversity (the "normies," as one cancer patient calls them) usually can't relate to our experiences or challenges. The ongoing growth of support groups reminds us of how much we need to be with those who understand our pain and problems.

Jennifer was more nervous than most visitors to the Outreach of Hope. When Dave came into the reception area to greet her, she burst into tears. Jennifer had never seen another person with a full-quarter body amputation just like hers. She was overwhelmed to see someone else who looked like her, someone else who understood how hard it was to button a shirt, wear shoulder pads, or tie shoes. Nothing could replace what happened to Jennifer in that encounter. She had found someone else who understood.

If your church or community doesn't have a Christian cancer support group or a support group that addresses your specific need, consider meeting on an informal basis with others who are struggling with some of the same issues as you are. Like Jennifer, you may encounter someone who shares a similar journey, who understands the pitfalls, who lessens the loneliness that can accompany adversity.

**Employ a Support Team**

Terry and Beve employed something no endurance runner should be without—a support team. They knew they couldn't run their races alone. They needed coaches, waterboys (or girls), medical personnel, and cheering sections, so they took the initiative to ask for help with specific problems.

Many race bystanders—friends and family—earnestly want to help. They are God's gift to us. They're more than just a gift to enjoy when life is going well, they're a gift to employ when our lives are turned upside down and we find ourselves struggling up a long, difficult hill. Then they become God's hands and feet, helping us endure the journey, helping us to run with perseverance.

Like most of the runners at the 100th running of the Boston Marathon, Sam was an incredible, well-trained athlete. For years he trained to be a part of this running world milestone, but at mile five, disaster struck. Sam pulled his hamstring. He knew he couldn't continue the course as a runner, but because he had trained for this race for so long, he wanted to finish. So Sam shifted into a power-walking stride and was relieved to have found a way to get to the finish line.

The crowd, however, didn't know that Sam had pulled his hamstring. All they saw was a runner who "gave up" early in the race. "C'mon, pick up the pace," they urged. "Run, don't walk," they yelled. "You can do it," they screamed. The shouts of encouragement stung. Sam couldn't possibly explain to every bystander that his hamstring was pulled and walking was the only way he could finish the race. He tried to ignore their cries, but it was impossible.

Finally, overwhelmed and exhausted by the crowd, Sam slipped under the race rope and finished his walk to the finish line. He endured, he finished—not in the way he planned to but in the only way he could.

Those of us who stand on the sidelines and earnestly desire to encourage our loved ones and friends who are enduring a season of suffering need to take Sam's story to heart. We must remember that there is no formula for encouraging a friend who is enduring adversity. Sometimes a friend needs a cheerleader. Sometimes a friend needs support for a mid-course correction. Sometimes a friend needs instruction to get past an obstacle. At other times, a friend may need a helping hand just to stay in the race.

Sam was an accomplished runner who knew the limitations of his injury as well as how to bypass it. Many of those who are enduring a time of suffering, however, don't understand what has happened to them or what to do about it. They know only that they can't go on. Their "injury" may not appear serious to bystanders, but it's overwhelming to them. In exhaustion and utter confusion, they simply stop. When that happens, enthusiastic cheering and running instructions won't help. Those of us who would be encouragers need to pray for God to meet the need for healing and strength. And we need to be sensitive to God's nudging—He just might want us to join in the race and lend a sturdy shoulder on which our hurting friend can lean.

Like most runners, Sam was used to running alone. So finishing the Boston Marathon alone was disappointing to him, but it wasn't devastating. Feeling alone, however, can be devastating to a person who is suffering. A person may grow accustomed to the lack of a cheering section, but the energy and concentration required just to keep going can obscure the reality of God's presence and obliterate the vision of what He might be doing in the situation.

That's where family and friends are invaluable. They can be the physical representation of God's presence—His hands and feet—a reminder that God is with them through us no matter what. They can stand with suffering individuals all the way, offering a smile when they're weary, prayers when they're weak, and an outstretched arm if they fall.
No runner can finish a marathon without a clear focus. Whether we’re enduring a race or the challenge of a lifetime, a clear focus helps carry us through the pain and distractions that can overwhelm us. The importance of focusing on a goal couldn’t have been more clear than when Dave was making his baseball comeback. He says, “I would never have stuck with my grueling rehab regimen without a definite goal in mind. I was fixed on returning to the major leagues. Every weight that I lifted, every muscle that I stretched, every hour that I spent in the gym was focused on the day when I’d once more put on my uniform, trot out to the mound and throw my first pitch toward home plate.”

A clear focus helps us endure in our spiritual life as well. Through the challenges Dave faced, he learned that it is impossible to “stick with our spiritual rehab regimen unless we keep our goal in full view. Every trial that we face, every burden that we shoulder, every agony that we suffer must be borne with our everlasting destiny in mind.”

That destiny is to be with Jesus—face to face, heart to heart with Him. That’s why Scripture tells us to “fix our eyes” on Him. When Jesus is clearly in focus, we can be empowered to endure whatever trials come our way.

Terry, a woman battling terminal cancer, knew just how important it is to focus on Him. “The one thing that gets me through this is I lie here in my hospital bed,” she declared, “is knowing every morning that, if God once more allows me to open my eyes, the first thing I’ll see is a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall at the foot of my bed. When I see that picture of Jesus, somehow I get the strength to make it through another day.”

Terry had discovered in her pain what all of us should remember every day of our lives: The way to get through the trials and difficulties of life is by looking to Jesus. When we focus on Him and consider how He lived and what He has done for us, we can be encouraged to endure.

When I consider how Jesus endured His trials, I am better able to face mine. Knowing what Jesus endured and how He endured it comforts me. Jesus doesn’t just sympathize with my pain and weariness, He understands it because He has endured it as well. I am so amazed that the Creator of the universe chose to become like one of His creations—a fallen one at that—and experience all of the horrors of humanity. When I consider what Jesus endured, my weariness is lessened and my heart is encouraged.

When I focus on Jesus, He not only provides encouragement, He empowers me to live out my faith. When I can’t go on, when I can’t possibly endure one more trial, setback, or hardship, I can ask God to fill me with His strength. I can ask Him to empower me with His divine energy so that I can face whatever lies ahead.

When my eyes are fixed on Jesus, I am never alone. Regardless of whether I’m a bystander or in the race, the Spirit of God lives in me. God knows my every thought, ache, and tear—even every single one of them! I may have to endure hardship, in fact, the Bible assures me that I will. But because I am a child of God, I will never have to endure hardship alone.

What an awesome God we have! He’s gone before us on the journey of pain and suffering. He empowers us when we’re called to endure. And He accompanies us every step of the way. No wonder the writer of Hebrews tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus . . . so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Quotations taken from The Encouragement Bible and Do Not Lose Heart, published by Zondervan Publishing House. Used by permission.
Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

For Barb McClure, the greatest challenge in enduring her husband’s 43-year battle with diabetes wasn’t his double leg amputation or his grueling dialysis regimen. Those were gut-wrenching experiences that still cause her heart to ache. The most difficult part was wondering why God didn’t step in and stop her husband’s suffering. Enduring when there is a clear goal or purpose is one thing, but enduring when you can’t imagine a single positive benefit is quite another.

Wayne and Barb McClure were committed Christians. They were strong supporters of their church and opened their home to weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings. They bought chairs for growing churches, computers for start-up ministries, turned their swimming pool into a baptistery and welcomed wounded animals and hurting people into their home where they nursed them back to health. If anyone could be worthy enough to earn God’s favor or miracle-working power, the McCloudes would top the list. But there would be no miracle of healing for Wayne.

First came a forced early retirement due to Wayne’s poor health. Then a leg amputation. Then multiple surgeries to prevent blindness. Then a second leg amputation. Then blindness. Then dialysis. Then a fall resulting in a broken arm. Then their beloved dog died.

Through all these trials, Barb never lost her faith. She never doubted God’s love for them. But she did struggle with trusting God because she didn’t understand why things were the way they were. She could see no positive results from their trials. That apparent futility made enduring their struggle so much more difficult and painful.

Even though it wasn’t easy for Barb to fully trust God during those dark times, she kept talking to Him. That’s the one suggestion she offers to others who find themselves in a place of enduring without knowing why. “It’s so important to keep talking to God, especially in the darkest moments. We have a right to question God. It’s good to tell God that we don’t like the situation. The ability to be completely honest with God helps. If we don’t talk with God about the problem or hurt or pain, it builds a wall between us and God that gets in the way of our relationship with Him.”

When we keep talking to God, when we keep an open heart toward Him, an answer may come in an unexpected way. It did for Barb. Near the end of Wayne’s struggle, Barb was reading a devotional that provided at least part of the answer she had been seeking:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God (Isaiah 40:1). Store up comfort. . . . The world is full of hurting and comfortless hearts. But before you will be competent for this lofty ministry, you must be trained. And your training is extremely costly, for to make it complete, you too must endure the same afflictions that are wringing countless hearts of tears and blood. Consequently, your own life becomes the hospital ward where you are taught the divine art of comfort. You will be wounded so that in the binding up of your wounds by the Great Physician, you may learn how to render first aid to the wounded everywhere.

Just a few days later, Wayne went home to be with Jesus. The packed memorial service gave evidence to the legacy of his faith and endurance. A great saint had gone home, and everyone in attendance knew that heaven was the richer for it.

Although Barb may never know on this side of eternity all of the reasons for their suffering, she knows that God is going to use their experience to help others endure. Because of what she has endured, God has equipped her to render aid to the wounded—and for now, that’s answer enough.


When you don’t have a purpose, you can’t endure. The secret is finding, or letting the Lord find for you, things you can do for other people. The hardest part was when we didn’t have anything to do, then the illness became totally engrossing.

BARB McCLURE
The Strength to Endure

Ultimately, I have to talk with God.
I get real honest with Him and tell Him that
I don't know how I'm going to get through whatever
is bothering me. As long as I'm at peace with God,
I know I can endure whatever happens.

Jennie

Our mission is to offer comfort, encouragement, and hope through Jesus Christ to those who suffer from cancer or amputation. We accomplish this mission by offering prayer support and non-medical referral services and resources for cancer patients, amputees, and their families. We also provide support materials for churches, healthcare professionals, and individuals who work with those who are battling cancer.

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