

## THREE DISCIPLINES FOR THE LONG HAUL

System 99 paid for most of my seminary training. It was a trucking company out on Swan Island. I worked for them as a Teamster, hustling freight across the loading docks.

Pushing a hand truck was a good counterpoint to my theological education. It was manly work; hard, physical work. And those of us who were still relatively young reveled in showing off what we could do. Teamsters thought they were the toughest people on earth.

For instance, we could stack two washing machines and truck them both across the dock at the same time. We used fork lifts only as a measure of last resort, preferring rather to wrestle heavy stuff on our own.

Those few old timers on the docks tried to talk sense to us. Dick Elmer was a grizzled old foreman who stumped up and down the dock in a rolling gimp. "Lift carefully," He'd tell us. "I've known too many guys who wore out their backs trying to do too much. If you want to move freight for a living, you better learn how to protect your body. Lift with your legs. Don't try to do it all at once."

Of course, we were still ten feet tall and bullet-proof so we would smile indulgently and flex our muscles. But Dick was on to something. If you're in trucking for the long haul, there are some disciplines you better learn in order to do it right. Those who abuse their bodies don't last.

I think of Dick's counsel when I look back on many I have encountered in ministry. I think about Eric, for instance. Eric was a new believer and on fire for Christ when he started attending our little church in a logging community SE of Portland, OR. With more passion than sense, confusing presumption with faith, Eric set out with his wife and kids for the mission field in Italy. The last I heard, Eric had returned from the field deeply disillusioned, and dropped out of church altogether. He was convinced faith didn't work.

Eric is just one of many names and faces of people who made a start with Jesus, but never finished. When confronted with disappointment, significant faith challenges, or costly decisions, they bailed. They never learned the disciplines necessary to sustain them for the long haul.

We are in a series we've called *Transforming our Lives: Transforming our Church*. It's a study from Romans 12. The Apostle Paul delivers a staccato burst of challenges and exhortations that describe how Christians live into their profession of faith in Christ Jesus.

It all begins with a deep, internal shift in which we offer our whole selves to God in sacrificial worship: fully alive to God, special for God, pleasing to God. We engage a process of life transformation—inside out change—fueled by the renewing of our minds. We trust God's Spirit to imprint God's truth upon our souls.

As the chapter unfolds, Paul talks about how those actions play out in our choices. We engage Spirit-given, special capacities in service to one another. We love each other authentically—no pretense. We treat each other with warmth and genuine respect. We protect our spiritual fire, sustaining diligence, stoking the flame, serving the Lord.

And then, in verse 12, Paul urges us to three disciplines necessary of we're going to make it over the long haul: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." None of these are native to us. They are disciplines we must learn and cultivate. The first calls us to reformat our hopes.

### *Joyful in Hope*

Back in the 1980's a comic strip character made the leap to the big screen. *Annie, the Musical* told the story of *Little Orphan Annie*, the irrepressible little red-haired girl who sang with

uplifting conviction, *“The sun will come out tomorrow!”* No matter how bad things are today, tomorrow will be better.

When Christians baptize Annie’s optimism, it churns out a hope based on God coming through for us tomorrow. The anticipation is immediate. We can’t wait for God to bring a complete turn-around in our circumstances. Our hopes don’t stretch much beyond the next few days or weeks and they have more to do with our prosperity, our health and our happiness than anything else.

For instance, one young woman blogger pours out her disappointment with God. She was going to keep a young child with her in church. She writes: “I prayed and prayed...and asked God to keep Parker silent. To let him sleep. To let me enjoy the service and be full on His word.

Parker screamed in the church. He has never done that before. I left with head held low as I heard the pastor make some comment about God's children. I was (am) embarrassed. Well, ok, I was mortified.

I don't get it. ...this time, in His house, He denied me. Even opposed my request. How was my request wrong? What should I have been asking for? This was the first time I was doubting God... and it was over something insignificant!”

I would suggest that if our hope in God runs no deeper than this, it will be incapable of generating much joy. And whatever joy we do experience will be determined more by the quality of our circumstances than the enduring reality of our hope.

The unique hope possessed by Christ-followers, that one thing for which we wait in anticipation, is “...the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...” (Heb. 6:19).

Yeah, yeah, yeah—we know Jesus is coming back and when he does everything’s gonna be wonderful, but what’s Jesus done for me lately?

Our culture trains us to expect instant relief. We want to feel better fast. We don’t want to hurt. And what we demand of our doctors and pharmacists, we also demand from God.

New Testament Christians rarely suffered from that cultural distortion. They saw themselves as misplaced persons in this world, aliens and strangers, exiles looking for a city with a firm foundation, citizens of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. The context of their lives was circumscribed by eternity. Their hope was tangible—a hope that intruded into their present circumstances with inexplicable joy.

Just a couple of quick observations and we must move on:

- If we do not enjoy the pleasure of Jesus’ company now, we will not put much energy into anticipating our reunion with him when he returns. Hope-filled joy will not re-define our present circumstances if spending time with Jesus doesn’t really mean much.
- Joyous hope does not diminish the reality of brutal pain. It is an underlayment that co-opts the finality of suffering in this life. We may lament freely and honestly while we struggle to sustain our tenuous grip on hope. Sometimes a return to joy-filled hope is a process, a journey, a decisive act of faith-filled defiance in the face of life’s sometimes bitter disappointments.
- If hope is to become joy-producing, it must become real. It matters that we contemplate our future with God and celebrate the primacy of our eternal, heavenly identity. One of the mind-renewing truths that must transform us is the larger context of our lives beyond this life. Moses wrote: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).

While we were in California at the CBAmerica meetings, Cathy Lebar gave the ladies a small gift basket. In it was a notepad with this little quip on the back: “Honey, God never said it would be easy. He said it would be worth it!”

### *Patient in Affliction*

The second discipline we need for the long haul is patience in affliction—God-given endurance that holds up under pressure. For most New Testament believers affliction meant persecution, ridicule, political and societal pressure to abandon faith and return to the old gods and goddesses, the old ways of finding life apart from the one true God.

But affliction—pressure—also comes from the acute distress of living on a fallen planet where nothing is as it should be. It comes from financial stress caused by lost jobs, economic collapse, abandoned marriages, or failed health. It comes from the crushing concerns we feel toward those we love when their lives are in shambles because of bad choices, or their faith is on the brink. It comes from unforeseen loss, sudden death, broken dreams.

Affliction describes any and every circumstance that suggests to us that following Jesus just isn't working and isn't worth it. How do you hold up under extreme pressure?

A long, long time ago someone much wiser than myself told me that affliction will either come between me and God and drive us apart, or it will push me up against God and hold me close. It all depends on where I choose to position myself.

Holding up under life's pressures requires an inner strength modeled by the patient endurance of Jesus, and forged in God's own presence. If we're going to make it for the long haul, we need patience—endurance under pressure.

### *Faithful in Prayer*

Last Monday Pastor Walt and I traveled to another church for a prayer meeting. The pastor there is facing a determined opposition who will float a motion in their annual business meeting to remove the entire staff. A small group of CB pastors in Michigan came together to pray for them.

We prayed for two hours. It was hard work, and we came home exhausted. We were engaged in that third necessary discipline for the long haul, faithfulness in prayer.

The word translated 'faithful' is intense. It's not the usual word associated with faithfulness. This word connotes sticking with something in the face of difficulty. The kind of faithfulness described by this word requires strength, effort, endurance, devotion. A reasonable paraphrase would urge us to be strong toward prayer. It is a word uniquely associated with prayer: fifty percent of the times this word is used in the New Testament it is connected with praying.

If you haven't figured it out yet, prayer is hard work. That's one of the reasons we avoid it. It demands focused attention, thoughtful engagement with God and others, spiritual intensity and energy. Prayer isn't throwing words up into the air, it's talking to God about what truly matters: what matters to him and what matters to us.

In prayer we come clean with God about the motives and movements in our souls. We acknowledge failures and seek forgiveness. We discern the mind of Christ so we can pray according to his will. We come boldly before God's throne as loved children, and we come flat on our face in humility and awe at God's holiness.

Sometimes prayer is a comfortable conversation with God in the quietness of our living rooms. Sometimes prayer is an agony of lament and petition in the face of life's perplexities. Sometimes prayer is active worship in joyous amazement at God's mercy and grace. Sometimes prayer is maintenance—regular, ongoing intervention for those we love.

When we prayed Monday we prayed as pastors for pastors, as church leaders for a church. We acknowledged our own failures and contributions to church strife, and we cried out for God's mercy, God's intervention, and for God's protection for his church and the glory of his name in this world.

Real prayer is work. It takes a special kind of strength. And we'll never make it over the

long haul of our lives if we neglect the discipline of prayer. We need to pray by ourselves in the privacy of our “closet,” and we need to pray with other believers, closing ranks together before God for the sake of his kingdom and glory.

Be faithful in prayer.

As much as I loved playing football in high school, I hated the conditioning. Banging into the blocking sled, wind-sprints, endless calisthenics, high-stepping through tires, having to run a mile under a certain time—it was stinking hard work. I just wanted to play—put the pads on a hit someone. But in a real game, if we were going to play hard all four quarters, we needed the disciplines of conditioning. As I was dragging myself through another 50 yard sprint, the coach would yell: “It’s the fourth quarter, gentlemen. Do you have what it takes to finish ahead of your opponent?” And because we knew he was right, we’d stiffen our resolve, and give ourselves to the disciplines of conditioning.

Listen, it’s not heaven yet. If we’re going to make it to the end of our Christian lives with faith intact, we’re going to need what Paul urges on us.

Do you want to finish well? Then engage the disciplines: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

*Closing Prayers:*

- “May the God of hope fill [us] with all joy and peace as [we] trust in him, so that [we] may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).
- “[We] pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen [us] with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being” (Ephesians 3:16).
- May we “Devote [ourselves] to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Colossians 4:2).