

Christian Doctrine Teaches Us about Endeavoring

In the life of a Christian is God's peace and joy, but also the weakness of faith, temptations, and oppression. God guides His own along the narrow way of the cross. With sufferings, He wishes to try their faith, keep them humble, and draw them into ever closer fellowship with Him. God also often sees His children worthy to confess their faith by their suffering. When a Christian remains in God's hands, his life is supported by an ever-deepening confidence that God leads everything for his best benefit. Humble thanks fill his heart because God has been patient to care for him, who is worthless, as His child. The hope of the coming glory also becomes more and more vivid to him. Watching and praying he awaits the final fulfillment of salvation. (CD 84)

Scripture often depicts a believer's life and endeavor as a journey toward a final destination: the glory of heaven. To reach this destination a believer must walk on the narrow road of faith without giving up and turning back. Prophet Isaiah encouraged the believing travelers of his day, "And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein" (35:8). Jesus teaches, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). And Paul encouraged his young coworker Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12).

Powers around us would want to wrest this gift of faith from us. Without faith we would lose all hope. The encouragement of the resurrected Jesus rings true yet today, "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown" (Rev. 3:11).

Escorts in Faith

Faith is a personal, God-given gift. It is important and necessary that we care for this gift on the endeavor so we don't lose it. However, we are not alone. We belong to a living, battling congregation that endeavors together. In this congregation, God unites His children in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and instructs them with His measure of grace. Here among God's children, we have close and loving escorts who encourage us on the way. Without these escorts we would soon be lost. We can speak to them when it feels we don't have enough strength to continue, or when we ponder: where do I go from here?

Trials and Joy

No one escapes trials of life, but what we learn from them is important. I have personally experienced that God's kingdom shines brightest at the time of heavy trial. In God's kingdom we have friends and escorts, those who lift and carry us.

God also gives strength through the power of the gospel, “for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16). Jesus comforts His own, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4) And the psalmist writes, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Ps. 126:5). Faith will carry us one day to the glory of heaven.

Eric Jurmu

A Cross or a Blessing?

Accepting children as gifts from God can sometimes be difficult in our endeavor as parents. Our logical mind can reason that a big family doesn't belong in this day and time. Accepting one baby after another into an already overwhelmed family can seem irresponsible. Is it even right for a child to be born to a tired mother, struggling to accept the pregnancy? And can there possibly be enough time, love and attention available for every child?

The Enemy Tempts

The devil can come near, whispering about the possibility of marital relations resulting in another pregnancy, advising us to keep our distance and to not take the chance. Sometimes it's hard to recognize where these feelings come from: a taxing and real-life situation, or from my own carnal flesh?

Dear God, I pray, search me and know my heart—even when I don't know it myself!

What if we made life a bit easier? Why not use the natural birth control methods like some in other faiths do? So tempting, so pleasing, it would make much more sense! My life would be easier, and the kids could have so much more!

But then, who would be in control? Who would decide when is the perfect time to have a baby? Who would decide when we have the right number of children? It would be me, not God—and this is God's work! I realize if I do even the smallest thing to step in and try to control things, I am stepping in the way of God. There simply is no other way, but to trust and accept. It is a humbling place to be.

As people we think we know and understand what is the best for us. But we do not know, and we do not understand! Our perspective is so limited, our understanding so small. We comprehend so little, but God sees all and knows the purpose of everything. Silence the endless reasoning—just trust! This is where God wants us to be. How safe it is to trust in His good will toward us!

The Blessings Are Many

If we could only shield our minds from the pressures of this time and society and, instead, focus on the blessings! Relish the touch of a small, soft hand pressing into our own; cherish the featherlight weight of a newborn on our chest; see the love in our teenager's eyes and the little one's joy when he meets his little sister or brother and playfully tosses them in the air!

When we recognize and appreciate God's perfect plan, we know that growing up in a big family can ready a person to meet the multifaceted demands of life. It teaches us to deal with different personalities, to take responsibility, to share and to help another in need. It even offers safety and care in our old age! Above all, in believing families we have much love and forgiveness to support us on our journey to heaven!

Care for Each Other

Dear mothers and fathers, talk! Talk with each other, with other mothers and other fathers! Share your feelings, your doubts, your fears. Strength is given when trials are shared. The gospel of forgiveness, always available, gives strength for the weak one.

We can also get support from those whose trials are different, for they can help us to understand that we all have a cross to carry. If this is mine for now, I want to carry it with joy! "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 10:21).

This is where I want to be, following Jesus, until the end of my short time on this earth!

Hanna Wittenberg

We Were Lifted in Prayer

The songwriter writes: "For the roses that I gather, for the thorns their stems contain, thanks for both, dear Heav'nly Father, though the thorns have brought me pain" (SHZ 344:4).

We all have trials, or thorns, in our lives. Sometimes they confront us so unexpectedly. Thirteen years ago, Ann was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of breast cancer. At the time, we had two young children and Ann was 6 ½ months pregnant with our third. Ken was a full-time student, and we were both working part-time to keep the family afloat.

Fears and Blessings Were Mixed

Abundant fears accompanied this diagnosis: Will Ann survive the cancer? What will she experience physically as a result of her treatment? Is it truly safe to begin chemotherapy despite the pregnancy? How will we afford to raise our family with this medical situation? Can our marriage endure 15 months of chemotherapy, with the doctors' insistence of no conception during this time? Will we be able to have more children after chemotherapy, or will the treatment destroy Ann's fertility as the doctors expect?

We had no choice but to leave all matters in God's hands; the reality was too overwhelming. In many ways we felt alone, as we didn't know other couples that had a similar situation. In other ways, we felt enveloped in love and were guided along. Friendships deepened with dear believers as precious discussions of faith became frequent. We were lovingly reminded to remain obedient to God's Word; we did not turn to birth control during the long chemotherapy treatment. We were lifted in prayer, and God's blessings were abundant.

Our daughter was born eight weeks after chemotherapy began. She was healthy and happy. The cancer treatment was not without complications, but together we were able to get through it. Much to the doctors' surprise, infertility never became an issue; we have had eight children after Ann's cancer. It has been a reminder to us of how God blesses those who try to be obedient.

Haven't We Been through Enough?

About one year after chemotherapy ended, Ken's health severely worsened as his liver auto-immune disease began showing signs of requiring an eventual liver transplant. This felt especially painful, and we asked ourselves and God, "Haven't we been through enough already?" It was an emotional experience, as both of us knew the pain of being a patient and the empathy and exhaustion of being a caregiver. Through the assistance of his medical doctor, naturopathic doctor, diet, exercise and lifestyle and God's blessings, Ken's health improved, but it was a very difficult time for us.

These trials deeply impacted our everyday lives. For some of the challenges, such as physical symptoms, we opened up to others and shared our sighs. For others, such as financial distress and feeling alone, we kept them inside and plowed ahead. As we look back, we wish we could have opened up more at the time, as God's kingdom is one of love and compassion. Being able to discuss our trials with others allows us to deepen our connections to other believers. We have also learned that it's okay and sometimes healthy to discuss death, as in some situations it feels closer to us.

God Has Guided Each Step

Despite the heaviness of our trials, we experienced and continue to experience so many of God's blessings. Our marriage became stronger, as we worked as a team in many ways. Our growing family is close as we've helped each other through the struggles. We have been blessed with healthy and wonderful children, and all of them are precious reminders of faith. Ken's health trials are far from over, but we continue to trust that we will be cared for in the unknown issues ahead. We have recovered from the financial distress and God has blessed our endeavors in supporting our family. We have felt the love and support of Zion, both when we lived in Detroit and now in Colorado. Looking back, we see that God has guided our family each step of the way, never leaving us alone. Most importantly, we have been preserved in faith. Although at times we can feel overwhelmed in our trials, we trust that God won't give us more than we can bear.

Dear brother and sister in faith, remember that God is a good God, and His ways are far above ours. We may not be able to understand why things go a certain way, but we can trust and believe that God remembers us and will care for us, regardless of what life brings. Above all, we can rejoice to be one of His own.

Ken and Ann Byman

Does God Remember Me?

Is this really God's plan for me? Does God truly know what's best for me and my family? Why would God allow such a painful trial to a believing couple? If I'm living apart from my spouse, who can I ask for the gospel when I've fallen into sin? Is there something I've done to deserve this? Isn't love and forgiveness enough to get through this trial and move past it?

Unanswered Questions, Loss and Grief

These are just some of the questions I've had over the years. My spouse has an addiction problem. We met and got married young and have many children together. After years of trying everything I could think of and learning as much as I could on how to be a healthy, supportive wife to an addict, we had to separate. I never imagined this for my life, as I'm sure my husband never imagined it for his. So how could this be? Addiction is like that. It destroys the addict and tears families apart.

During this time of separation, I've grieved the loss of my marriage and what I imagined my life would be. I've also grieved for my children and the fact that they do not have dad in their lives; maybe they never will. This grief has been extremely heavy at times, and I have found that it is in the darkest moments when the devil plants the most doubts. Some days I wondered where I'd get strength to continue another day. It was then that I also wondered: does God even remember me?

God Gives Joy, Escorts in Faith

I have found, however, that God has known my needs all along, even when I doubted so heavily. I notice now when I'm with my children that I have an overwhelming feeling of joy and love for them. I feel so fortunate. When I'm out for an evening with friends I've found that I can now truly enjoy the evening and have joy in my heart. God has given me many believing friends, a loving family and those who have been willing to selflessly help me, even in my lowest moments. It has made the darkest days brighter and taken some of the deepest pain. They have forgiven me all of my sins and doubts and I've received strength to continue. Through these escorts in faith, God has given me strength to remain believing.

The love of the believers is an amazing blessing. This trial has clarified to me the beauty of God's kingdom. It has helped me treasure the relationships I have and hold them close. The believers have a love for their own like no other, and this is a God-given gift. God has remembered me! He gave me believing escorts because He saw I needed them. This has been one of the most precious things to me when wanting to keep my faith. I've cried and prayed to God that I wouldn't lose these believing escorts.

God Has a Plan for Me

This trial has taught me to turn to God in prayer, to trust in Him and to remember that He knows best. When I remember that He has a plan for me and my family, even for my husband, it brings peace and

comfort. God knows what we need, and He will give as He sees fit. Although I don't know what that is, I want to be patient and trust in Him. By caring for my doubts and sins with the gospel of forgiveness I receive strength, even as a single mom, to continue in this trial.

I heard something when I was young that has helped me keep faith close: "You can't battle a trial without a clean conscience." I don't remember where I heard it, but I have often thought of it when it feels I can't fight anymore. Life is much easier when my sins are forgiven. It's easier to be happy and accepting, even for a moment. It's easier to be thankful. Even in this trial, I have so much to be thankful for.

Writer's name withheld

I Prayed for Peace

Many have experienced the loss of someone close to them: a father or a mother, a grandparent, a brother or a sister, a close friend. This is very difficult. The loss of one's spouse, however, seems to be a special circumstance. I will attempt to share my experience.

It has been over two years since my life's companion closed her eyes for the last time. It wasn't supposed to happen this way, or so we thought. We were married 42 years. I was the sick one and had already more than once knocked on death's door: an almost-fatal heart attack, a leukemia diagnosis, a high-risk surgery to correct an abdominal aortic aneurism.

She was the healthy one. But then, completely unexpectedly, she was diagnosed with bile duct cancer while we were on vacation in Minnesota. The prognosis was grim, but she was optimistic and determined to be among the 10–30% who survived. It was not to be. In a little over seven months she was gone.

My wife's last night will be forever imprinted on my heart. A dear friend who was with us in the palliative care room until shortly before her passing, sang to her: *Nuku, nuku lapsukainen, / enkeli sun suojaa, / rukoileepi puolestasi / taivaallista Luojaa* (Sleep, sleep my child, / an angel watches over you, / prays on your behalf / to the heavenly Creator).

Not long after, she took her final breath. Then she was gone. Even though I knew the moment was near, I sat there in utter disbelief. Death seems so final. An icy cold enveloped me. I wanted to shout: *No, no, no—this can't be!* But, it was. Marion. My Marion was gone.

Then, the aftermath. How do I process the loss of the one I've lived with and loved for over four decades? How do I go on when I have no will to do so? What do I do when I reach for her in the night and she isn't there? How can I live with the pain, the grief, the loneliness?

These were all questions with no answers. I would go to the cemetery, kneel at her grave and not want to leave. I suggested to God it would be better if I could join her. What was the point in living with such pain? Everyday life took too much effort. I felt little more than an empty shell.

Whether we like it or not, life goes on. One summer day I stood at her grave and thought, I can't go on—I just don't *want* to. It seemed I heard a voice, like a whisper in the wind. Her voice. *Yes, you can. You must. Remember me, but don't be sad. I've gained the victory, but you need to keep living. Your time is not yet.* So, I prayed that God would give strength.

Faith, family and friends. Prayer. Knowing that my loved one is in the perfect care of the Lord Jesus, watched over by the angels and acceptable to the Heavenly Father. All these have carried me and continue to carry me. Along with the hope of seeing her again one day.

The prayers of so many were felt. Members of the community were also so caring. A local pharmacist familiar with my wife's illness had no words, but a hug and shared tears spoke volumes.

The first time I served in my duty of preaching the Word in my home congregation after my wife's passing, it felt that the congregation's love carried me from the pew to the pulpit.

I prayed for peace, for acceptance. And in time God answered my prayer. One night, unable to sleep, I stood on my deck in the wee hours of the morning looking at the stars. Words of the psalmist came to mind: *When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? (Ps. 8:3–4).*

I then felt God's great love, that He sent His Son into this world, that He gave me the gift of a wife and gave us 42 years together. Even though He saw it good to call her home, I have so much to be thankful for. I knew there would still be difficult days ahead, yet I had to say: *Thank you, good Father, for the years You gave us.* God had given peace and acceptance.

To you who live as I do, missing your loved ones, be encouraged! They would not want us to be sad. Rejoice that they have attained heaven. Continue believing the good message of the forgiveness of sins. God will carry you through the difficult days, as He has carried me, and He will give comfort in your loneliness. The cares of this life are only for a season, then the glory of heaven will be realized. Our loved ones await us there.

Dave Anderson

Discussion Points:

1. Sing song of Zion 367 (O Soul, Let God Forever Guide You). What can we learn from these words?
2. What powers around us today threaten personal faith?
3. Share an experience of how God's kingdom supported you in a time of trial.
4. Tell about a song of Zion that has been a comfort for you in times of trial.