

ENDURANCE • Part 1

After over 40 years in the ministry with the last 15 as a senior pastor, I've taken the last 17 months off. 40 years of sermon and teaching preparation for 1-3 messages every week and then poof, nothing. My soul needed a Sabbath. I'm rested now. This is my first dive back into message preparation and study. I'm a bit rusty. I can feel it. My thoughts don't connect as well as they should. My writing is dis-jointed. But if you can hang in with me for the next six weeks, I'm hoping the study will get better and sweeter and easier to follow. And I'm praying it will bring some encouragement and challenge to your life.

For the past many months, there has been much speculation on social media platforms regarding prophecy and the "last days". Are we living in those days? How will we know when are? What should be our posture and position? The disciples posed these same types of questions to Jesus in Matthew 24. Specifically, in **Matthew 24:3**, we read this – *“As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us, they said, when will this happen (that is, when will the temple be destroyed and not one stone left on another) and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”*

In **Matthew 24:4-12**, Jesus began to describe the events leading up to His return and to indicate signs of that return. We'll look at those events over the next six weeks to be sure, but as important and maybe even more important than those events, in my opinion, is the challenge and statement that Jesus lays out in **Matthew 24:13 (NIV)** – *“but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”*

The New Century Version says - **Matthew 24:13 (NCV)** *“But those people who keep their faith until the end will be saved.”*

The English Standard Version says - **Matthew 24:13 (ESV)** *“But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”*

The Living Bible Version says - **Matthew 24:13 (LB)** *“But those enduring to the end shall be saved.”*

I think I like the Living Bible Translation most. (*When I was preaching, I would regularly use 13 different bible versions, looking for the translation that spoke most clearly and accurately to that point of scripture*) Because it speaks to not just enduring for a period of time or enduring one trial or one unpleasant experience, it speaks to continual enduring. Steadfast enduring. Unmovable enduring. Resolute enduring. Unwavering enduring.

And if there is anything the Christian community, the church, God's people, need at this hour in our history – it is our continual endurance. Steadfastness. Perseverance. We live in a time where so many believers have little faith. Small faith. Infant like faith. Immature faith. And while its ok to start off with newborn faith, our faith must increase. (just what the disciple asked for from Jesus in **Luke 17:5**) Our faith must grow and deepen and mature.

Literally, our faith must grow up. **Ephesians 4:15 (AMP)** says it like this - *“Rather, let our lives lovingly express truth [in all things, speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly]. Enfolded in love, let us grow up in every way and in all things into Him Who is the Head, [even] Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One).*

Another way of saying this same thing, the idea of growing up spiritually, maturing spiritually, is found in **James 1:5-6 (NIV)** – *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”* In other words, be so grounded in the word that you know the truth so well, you won't be tossed to and fro by every rumor and new found teaching that comes down the pike especially in regards to end times prophecy.

I think this lack of spiritual grounding and maturity has led to the churches stilted and feckless response to the times we live in. I know this may sound critical. That is not my heart. It's really a reflection of what God has been teaching me these past 24 months. Nearly two years ago, I was traveling through Europe with Sharon and our three daughters. I developed a pretty severe infection in my foot. We flew home early and had several procedures/operations done on my foot to cut out the infection. My foot looked like hamburger patty.

Long story short, I couldn't walk on my foot for nearly a year. It took that long for to close up and to heal up. The past several months I've just been learning to walk again. My leg had atrophied. Not much muscle left. I can't tell you the amount of times I wanted to throw in the towel. I was discouraged. I was ticked off. I was absolutely ready for the Lord to take me home. I wanted to be done with this test. And the two passages of scripture God used to encourage me?

James 1:2-4 (NIV) *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Matthew 24:13 (LB) *“But those enduring to the end shall be saved.”*

Every day was a real struggle. Every day of my healing felt like a marathon. I was lonely and isolated. Yet, I hung on to the truths of these twin passages. God has a plan. He's growing me. He's maturing me. Don't quit. Not ever. My job was to endure. My job was to stay faithful. That's your job as well. And let me add this – this endurance that is required of us does not refer to a personal self-effort or self-help belief. It's not some lame Tony Robbins walk over a hot bed of coals sort of non-sense. The endurance we need, the endurance that is required comes from the Lord as we are connected to Him.

Acts 1:8 (NIV) says this - *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* When you ask Jesus Christ into your life to be your Lord and savior, when you ask Him to forgive you of your sins and when you ask Him to help you become the person He created you to be, God's Holy Spirit comes to reside inside of you. And the promise here in Acts 1:8 is that He will give you His power now to olive the life He has purposed you too live.

So where does the power come from to Endure? From Jesus. From being connected to Him. That's how God works. That's how God shows up in your life. Are you discouraged? Is your marriage in trouble? Do you have kids who have gone astray? Whatever your crises are, God will give you the power to endure and persevere and overcome. That's a promise you can take to the bank.

Ephesians 3:20 (NCV) says, *“With God's power working in us, God can do much, much more than anything we can ask or imagine.”* I 100% love that verse. In fact, I hope you will memorize this verse this week because you need to get some promises of God under your belt and in your mind so that when you start to doubt, when you start to waver, when you start to get tossed to and fro, when you start to feel discouraged, when you start to feel depressed God can bring that to your memory. God's power is available to accomplish whatever He has called you to do. Stay connected to Jesus. That's where the power comes from. Every day be in the word. Every day, rely on Him. Every day, be aligned with Him. Every day be connected to Him. Jesus said this in **John 15:5 (NIV)** *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

I love this passage because in black and white terms, no ambiguity, no gray area, in clear cut language Jesus says flatly – if you stay connected to me, you'll bear lots of fruit. If you don't stay connected to me, you can't and won't do bubkas. I look at my own life and see the time I was most fruitful was when I was closely connected to Jesus. When I wasn't connected to Him, not so much fruit.

That's the first lesson on how to keep enduring to the end. Stay connected to Jesus. Stay connected to the word.

Back to the events regarding Jesus' return: No doubt, we must be aware of the signs of our time. Jesus told us we should be able to interrupt the signs of our time in **Matthew 16:1-3 (AMP)** *“Now the Pharisees and Sadducees came up to Jesus, and they asked Him to show them a sign (spectacular miracle) from heaven [attesting His divine authority].² He replied to them, When it is evening you say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,³ And in the morning, It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and has a gloomy and threatening look. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”*

As I mentioned at the start, there has been much speculation regarding end times prophecy and how the Wuhan covid virus might play into that. A friend of mine told me he thought this all might be a dry run for what is to come. The shut-down of the economy, food lines, financial distress, a push towards a one world rule, sky high unemployment, churches forced to disband, constitutional violations run amok. My personal opinion is that idea holds merit. Look at how we have responded to this virus. Imagine something like the bubonic plague coming our way. But it's all speculation. What's our role? Keep enduring. Keep persevering whatever the present and future may bring. Know the signs of the time. All for the glory of God. (Colossians 3:23)

Back to Matthew 24. Jesus laid out the signs of his return. That period will be characterized by (1) **false Christs** (Matt. 24:4-5) (2) **wars and rumors of wars** (Matt. 24:6) in which nations **will rise up against** each other on a global scale (Matt. 24:7a), and (3) unusual disturbances in nature including **famines and earthquakes** (Matt. 24:7b). These things, Jesus said, will be **the beginning of birth pains**. As a pregnant woman's birth pains indicate that her child will soon be born, so these world-wide conflicts and catastrophes will mean the end of this age is near.

The first sign that His return is close, is the rise of false Christs. These false christs will claim to be from Jesus, but they are not. They serve the evil one and his purposes. This is why Jesus says in **Matthew 24:4 (NIV)** "*Watch out that no one deceives you.*" Let me say right up front. If you ever hear anyone claim to know when Jesus is going to return, run. That person is a deceiver. A false prophet. A false Christ. How do we know that?

Jesus said in **Matthew 24:36-42 (NIV)** "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*"³⁷ *As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.*³⁸ *For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;*³⁹ *and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.*⁴⁰ *Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.*⁴¹ *Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.*⁴² *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."*

How do you protect yourself from being deceived? A couple of ways. First, know the truth. God's truth and God's will is found in God's word. The Bible. Know God's word. Read God's word daily. Hear God's word preached weekly. Study it. Memorize it. Meditate upon it. And most important – live it. Apply it. Do it. **James 1:22 (NIV)** says, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*"

Second, test everything. **1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 (NIV)** says, "*Be joyful always;*¹⁷ *pray continually;*¹⁸ *give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*¹⁹ *Do not put out the Spirit's fire;*²⁰ *do not treat prophecies with contempt.*²¹ *Test everything. Hold on to the good.*²² *Avoid every kind of evil.*"

Christians need to test what they hear and read, by comparing it with the Word of God, to determine if it is divine in its origin. This is difficult, but it is possible for the believer (1 Cor. 2:14). Each Christian has the responsibility and ability to do this. When you know God's word intimately, you will be able to discern falsehoods being told you.

DIGGING A BIT DEEPPER: Start to read through 1 Peter for your quiet time these next five weeks. Below is a brief overview of this important book of the Bible.



*The dark clouds of persecution against the church were on the horizon. The insane Roman Emperor Nero was seeking scapegoats to divert the public's suspicion that he had started the great fire that devastated Rome. Nero pinned the blame on the Christians, whom he already perceived as enemies of Rome because they would worship none but Christ. As a result, they were encased in wax and burned at the stake to light his gardens, crucified, thrown into prison and handed over to wild beasts in the gladiator games. Under Nero's reign of terror, Peter would be martyred, but before he died, Peter wrote this letter to encourage all Christians to **stand firm to the end.***

WEEK #1: Read and Study 1 Peter 1:1-25

WEEK #2: Read and Study 1 Peter 2:1-25

WEEK #3: Read and Study 1 Peter 3:1-22

WEEK #4: Read and Study 1 Peter 4:1-19

WEEK #5: Read and Study 1 Peter 5:1-14

1 Peter 5:8-9 (NIV) *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”*