

Pressing On

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“How do you keep going?” That question has been asked in various ways numerous times during my eight years of responding to the challenge of multiple myeloma cancer. After two stem-cell transplants at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, extensive chemotherapy treatments at the Lexington Cancer Center, experimental programs at the Dana-Farber Cancer Center in Boston, and now daily medications to fight the increase in cancer activity while adjusting to the side-effects, I can say that sometimes I want to quit. Not in regard to my faith, but concerning the stress and struggle of the race. There are new issues with blood clots, the fractures in my back now total ten, and even walking is tough. It has been a long journey. So how have I persevered?

Writing on this topic as requested has given me an occasion to reflect back on those eight years and to see how God has worked in me and through me to understand perseverance. As I reflect on what God is teaching me, I can see that it is possible to remain faithful, even though fatigued; mainly because His grace is fresh each day. My intent is to share with you some insights and stories that will stimulate you to endure your difficulties and face your crises. These are some of the principles and practices that I have used to keep pressing on.

1. Emulate His Example.

What did Jesus do to remain faithful to his purpose? What does that mean for us? Look at Luke 22:42-43; 1 Peter 2:20-24; 5:5-10; and Hebrews 12:1-3. Those passages show that Jesus entrusted the situation to His Father, and He endured His struggle through God’s strength. He did this to win our salvation, and to give us encouragement so that we would not lose heart in our race, no matter what we were facing.

2. Embrace His Grace

On the day following my diagnosis of cancer in 1997, God gave me a metaphor, a railroad track, to help me see that His grace was sufficient, like two rails of a track. It is now called the H and D Railroad Track. One rail represented healing; and the other dealing. This came while I was meditating on Paul’s request concerning his thorn in the flesh in II Corinthians 12:7-10. In God’s purpose and providence, I like Paul, was to embrace His grace and to accept that God does work all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28-39). Through Him we are more than conquerors.

Sometimes when persons are going through a time of testing they try to go down only one rail of the track. They give their situation to God and ask for healing, but do not want to go through any processes themselves. Others think that they can do the adjacent rail only, but forget that it is the Great Physician that brings true healing. My doctors remind me that they can only put me in a position to get well, but they cannot do that for me, it is in God’s hands. If you do not go down both rails of the track at the same time, you will wreck. In other words, there is a place for us to pray and there is a time for us to take the prescriptions when appropriate. To receive His dealing grace we ask in prayer believing and we invite others to join with us (Philippians 4:11-13). When people ask why I am still here, my response is generally because of people’s prayers, physicians’ pills, and God’s providential purpose. Maybe I should add my commitment to persevere. Sometimes I humor folks a little with the comment, “You keep praying and I will keep popping.” Underlying that thought is my commitment to keep on embracing the grace of God each day to

help me run the race laid out for me. Without perseverance and planning along with the other parts of prayer and pills, the race is over.

3. Listen to Godly Counsel.

Some of the best help has come from my family, especially my wife Beth. She has encouraged me so much to stay in the game, even when I was at peace with going on to heaven. At one point during the very difficult time of chemotherapy, I was thinking about the joy of heaven and the people with whom I would be reunited. Of course, she was pleased that I would go there, but she did not want me to go prematurely if the Lord willed otherwise. So she made this gentle statement: "You are so ready for heaven, you are not much help down here." And she was right. There was more for me to do with my life, my family, my church family, the community family, and the world family. So I should seek to know what that would be and then do it with God's grace as long as He let me run the race.

Several months later I was preparing a lesson on how a leader leaves a legacy that will last from II Timothy 2:1-2. We often emphasize verse two, but the grace strength in verse one is crucial. While embracing grace we relay our faith to persons who will carry the torch long after our time is over. During the lesson I asked this question that the Lord had prompted me with during my preparation the day before: "If I increase your impact and expand your influence for Christ, but it may shorten your life, would you take the deal?" That question not only motivated me to stay faithful in a reproducing and multiplying ministry, but it also brought others into the process when they heard me raise the point in subsequent times of testimony and teaching. Beth invited me to choose some of those hungry persons and invest more time in mentoring them so that what God had done through the years would be passed on to them so that they could then touch others.

4. Learn from Past Experiences.

When I performed my first wedding ceremony, it was for my brother Kent and his wife to be, Cheryl. When doing the vows, they were to repeat after me, "with all of my heart's affection." Instead, I said, "with all of my heart's infection." They said it correctly, even though I had made a mistake that pointed out to me after the wedding. Infection has been a problem for me for many years, and the cancer just followed a number of other physical issues that have plagued me through the years.

During the wedding ceremony for Beth and me on June 9, 1973, while speaking after our vows where we committed that we would stay with each other in sickness and in health, Charles Stiles emphasized that "in any affair of the heart there must of necessity be a Calvary. There cannot be a giving of one's self without some pain. In the days when you're hurt, you're sick, when you are lonely and nothing works out properly, I pray that you will remember the love of this moment."

Beth and I subsequently attended a seminar led by Dr. Samuel Southard at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati that further prepared us to keep our vows. His point in one session was that the key to marriage was memory. He took us to 1 Corinthians 13 and talked about faith, hope and love. Faith related to the past, hope regarded the future, and love helped us respond in the present. Building memories of seeing where God was faithful to us and we were faithful to each other would be a foundation for building our lives and our marriage. That would give us hope for the future because we would remember how God had been there for us, how we had been there for each other, and regardless of what was ahead, we could live in hope. That would then produce more love and perseverance for the present day. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:7: "...love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Beth has spoken several times

during the trials that God has protected me on several occasions, and she believed that He would continue to do so. Her memory of past experience has encouraged me to keep running.

5. Remember that Hope Helps.

When Paul speaks of hope four times in Romans 15:1-13, he notes that some of the sources of hope are the Scriptures, the songs of the united church, and the Holy Spirit. They all are designed to help us find what God intends us to enjoy: encouragement and endurance (verses four and five). You have heard of the acrostic on Hope that says “He Offers Everlasting Peace.” I would add Helps to Hope and emphasize in my own acrostic on Helps that He Extends Love and Perseverance Strength. He gives me the spiritual power to carry on. When you have eternal hope your destination is set and your victory is secure, all you have to do is remain faithful to Christ and His mission for you. That makes the race more manageable. It also fuels you for the journey. Recycling that hope to other people then has energized me, as well. As Proverbs 11:25b indicates, “he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” As I have sought to recycle grace to others who were hurting, I found the help I needed to keep pressing on. One couple in the horse industry who heard me speak of Healing and Dealing, then named their new colt, “Hope and Cope.” That is what you and I can determine to do. We choose to keep hope alive and determine to cope with our challenges through the empowering grace of God.

At one point during the difficult time of chemotherapy and preparation for the transplant, I did have a few moments of despair. So when speaking to my family about this, and acknowledging that this was going to be hard to endure, I made a commitment with this expression: “I am doing it for the grandchildren.” Of course, neither of my children were married at the time, and are not now eight years later, but I was thinking of the future generations that would come. For them I wanted to set an example, give them a testimony of a Christian’s credibility while going through crisis, and use this as a teachable moment for all that would be checking to see if my faith was real. Faith, hope and love were real to me then, and are true now. God has given me opportunities to witness of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in sharing the gospel with people that were around me being tested with medical issues I have helped them find eternal life that will give them heaven later and help now.

6. Recognize the Model of the Marathoner.

Last year my sister-in-law and grace, Cheryl Mays, determined that she would run her first marathon at the age of 49 to help raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. She wanted to do this because my myeloma is a blood cancer and is in the same family as those other cancers and the research dollars that had been raised in the past provided some of the work that was needed to find a cure for multiple myeloma. (She set a Kentucky record raising over \$14,000). To prepare her for the marathon she joined a group called “Team in Training.” She found that it is best for marathon running if you do it in a small community who knows you and cares for you and instructs you on how to do it right from a relational base. On the night before the race in San Diego she had dinner with her small group, including some of her family and my wife and me. We all heard one speaker say that as you run there is a temptation to either go out too fast or too slow. Instead, one has to run at the pace that was determined in the preparation period and in doing the running at that speed, there would be a greater possibility of finishing. Cheryl did what she had prepared to do, and she completed the course.

There have been times in my cancer journey that I was too compulsive, and other times where I was too complacent. Finding the right speed required wisdom from God and from my family. Both Ryan and Amanda, my now adult children, have helped me in this process. The Southland

Christian Church family has been incredible with their support, and I have let many of them serve me in their personal ways so that I could use my energy to minister to others in ways only I could do. Without what they have done for Beth and me we could not have continued to fight cancer and do family and church ministry. And Beth has been the one who as my partner on the point has continued to remind me of how I could endure the pain and persevere. At one point before a painful biopsy was to be performed on me, she wrote me a letter and included the poem by Babcock: "Be strong, we are not here to play, to dream, to drift, we have our work to do, and loads to lift. Shun not the struggle, face it, tis God's gift. Be strong..." Both the struggle and the strength were gifts from God. She encouraged me to endure and I have sought to do so.

When the Olympics were being held in Atlanta in 1996, I decided to buy a brick at Centennial Park and make a statement about what was important to me. Working within the guidelines and limits on the number of characters allowed, my conclusion was: "Team Roy Mays, By Grace Wins." In a context where performance was measured, I wanted to state that it is the work of Christ that really matters and it is through faith in His work on the cross and in the power of the resurrection that makes us winners in the end. After a few months of chemo in 1997, my children gave me an enlarged photo of the one we made showing all four of our family with one shoe each touching that brick. They added a plate below the photo that recounted we were "Walking in Faith, Father's Day 1997."

Perseverance is a faith journey, and it is best done if possible with a family. When Amanda and I attended the women's marathon in Los Angeles in 1984, we saw Joan Benoit enter the Coliseum to great cheers as she finished first. Much later there was another runner who attempted to complete the last lap. Her name was Gabriella Anderson Scheiss. Several times she had to avoid the medical teams that were observing how hard it was for her to keep running, even now barely walking. (If they had touched her in any way, she would have been disqualified.) As she passed in front of us, I told Amanda who was all of six years old at the time, that she must remember that one should try to run so that you are first, but the most important lesson, is to finish the race. Being faithful to the finish is its own reward.

When Paul wanted to make this point to Timothy in II Timothy 4:6-8, he called him to imitate the fighter and the runner. In this passage you have the keys for all of us to persevere with courage for a few more minutes: fight one more round and run one more lap.

May you embrace His grace and run your race knowing that all who are faithful will win in the end. Before you get to heaven, let's extend some help and express some hope down here. Press on with perseverance!

