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SACRED

ENDURANCE

FINDING GRACE AND STRENGTH
FOR A LASTING FAITH



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CALLED TO A RACE

*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the
upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

PHILIPPIANS 3:14

On August 28, 1963, Mahalia Jackson took to the stage to use her beautiful, soulful voice to encourage the souls of more than a quarter million men and women gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington, organized to advocate for the civil and economic rights of African Americans.

Jackson endured many trials as she got involved in the civil rights movement by singing and providing financial support. As her gospel music gained widespread popularity, she received death threats from neighbors in her quiet Chicago neighborhood. During that day on the Lincoln Memorial, she would be instrumental in the creation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech, "I Have a Dream." She reportedly called out from behind him on the podium, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin. Tell 'em about the dream!" That urging led him to ditch his notes and use the refrain, "I have a dream."

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Jackson's place in history, including but not limited to gospel music and the civil rights movement, is remarkable yet not widely known. She was devoted to living out the gospel and singing God's praises. And on that day, she belted out two songs. The first, "How I Got Over," is a song of endurance in the face of hardship, and the lyrics describe her own hard times. How did she "get over"? She looked to Jesus, the one who died and suffered for her. She sang this in recognition of her Savior:

And I want to thank him for how he brought me . . .

Oh thank my God how he kept me.

I'm gonna thank him 'cause he never left me.¹

After a life of miserable trials and wonderful mercies, Jackson finished her race in January 1972 at the age of sixty.²

RUNNING YOUR RACE

You also are in a race for your life. That may surprise you as you sit in a comfy chair or lounge in a coffee shop reading this book, but it's true. It's a race that requires all of you, and it's not easy. Jackson was in a race for her life, and the lyrics she sang to that large crowd reminded them that they too were in a race. She sang in wonder of how she'd made it through all those years of struggling and falling. And then she gave the answer, the same answer that will get you and me over.

You may not face the struggles of segregation and threats of lynching, but you too will have to endure. You'll struggle along the way. You likely have already.

One of the biggest lies about the Christian faith is that it should be easy. But God doesn't give us that promise. He never

said we would be without trouble. Things threaten to trip us up in our race: someone we love dishonors the marriage bed and finds another person; God seems to prosper those who've wronged us. Doubts come into our heads, and we wonder if God's Word is true. Does God mean what he says? When life seems dull and things other than God bring greater joy and pleasure—at least momentarily—we find we're no longer attending church, let alone thinking about God.

You and I are in a race.

Over the past few years, I've seen marriages of friends fall apart. I've talked with parents whose teenage son no longer believes in God. I've seen churches almost split, and I've walked through broken relationships.

And then there's the everyday ups and downs of life. Sometimes the race feels almost effortless, as if you could continue indefinitely with a tailwind at your back, carrying you forward. But other times you're hardly moving or even incapable of taking another step.

In the American context, it's easy to be comfortable with our faith. We can be culturally good but spiritually dead. But there's a reason the Bible often refers to the Christian life as a race. There is much at stake, and getting to the end takes more trust and effort than we'd like to admit. Our integrity, our witness, and even our very lives are at stake.

And there's grace available for every single step we take, every act of faith, every decision to obey. Every single thing we do is covered and shored up by the grace of God. Thankfully, the prize at the end of this race couldn't be more worth our pressing on in the struggle.

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I want to share a story with you, a story about a race I ran. You may have a similar sort of memory about athletic endeavors or one about a mental struggle. It can remind you about life and faith and about discovering what it means to run well for God's glory.

It was a race of a lifetime—at least that's how it felt to this seventeen-year-old in the anchor leg of the 4x400 relay on the biggest stage in my state. I was the team's anchor, so the relay ended with me. I would build on the efforts of my teammates, and the result would post when I crossed the line. As my turn came, it felt like everything was riding on me. Could I maintain the incredible pace all the way around the track without my body giving out? I'd practiced innumerable times and knew how to pace myself, but as my team was in first place (leading one of the fastest teams in the state), adrenaline and nerves took over.

As I waited for my teammate to complete her lap, the sun beat down on my head, and sweat dripped off my chin. The third runner on the team rounded the last curve and headed down the straightaway to hand off the baton to me. When she was within twenty meters, I started to run, reaching back like we'd practiced countless times before to secure the baton and officially begin my leg of the race. Baton in hand, my brain sent one simple, screaming message: run!

I took off—sprinting as fast as I ever had. My legs began moving at a speed I'd never experienced. I rounded the first curve and still had plenty of energy left. I completed the back stretch, feeling strong. Then I completed the final turn successfully. But with just one hundred meters left, something happened. My legs

began to give out. The ability to lift my feet and put them back down quickly had greatly diminished.

I felt like I was running in mud. Every stride took maximum effort. I could feel myself slowing down—after the way I'd started, it was like slow motion—but I wasn't quitting. The crowd was up on its feet, screaming and pointing. I had maintained a good lead through three hundred meters, but now another racer was on my heels, catching up. With each step closer to the finish line, I experienced great relief and great pain.

I was so close. . . . Would I make it to the end? I could taste it. I could see it. Would I get the prize that my team sought?

Yes! I crossed the finish line and collapsed. I was exhausted, but we were state champions. When I think about that race, even now my breath leaves me. And I can't help but grin. I can't believe I finished that race. Had I known what lay ahead of me, I'm not sure I would have taken the starting line. But the excruciating strain of the last hundred meters was worth the joy of winning with my team.

GOD'S PROVISION IN THE RACE

Similarly we're called to a spiritual race, a sacred race, and God will supply all we need for that race. "The race that is set before us" is the Christian life (Heb 12:1-2). More specifically our race set before us is our hope in Jesus as we hold fast to our confession, trusting in the One who is faithful (Heb 6:18; 10:23). Our hope is that we get to the end of our days, saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). That's our end goal. That's our finish line. And we look forward to rewards at the end of this great race.

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Like my track meet, the Christian life is a race that will have an end. One day we'll be complete in glory and with Christ. We'll receive a prize when this race is finished. But until that time, we must learn to run, endure, persevere, and finish.

The race of faith isn't easy; it takes effort—sometimes significant effort, a finishing-the-final-hundred-meters type of effort. It has great joys but can also be painful. We can fall and will definitely struggle, so there are moments when it's tempting to quit. This is why we need to learn how to condition our mind, soul, and body for the race set before us.

The Scriptures are filled with stories of saints who endured to the end while stumbling along the way. If they weren't stumbling because of their sin, they were being tossed about by the trials of life. My mind often turns to the apostle Paul, who endured imprisonment and beatings and ridicule and betrayal—all for Jesus. What motivated him to stay in the race? Maybe it was the prize. As we see in Philippians 3:14, it was also because he was called to the race, and he understood his calling.

Before we look directly at that text, let's take a look at the Scriptures before it. Paul was warning the Philippian church to watch out for those who would attribute progress toward godliness to works of the law and who would place their confidence and security in themselves. On the contrary, you and I are to “put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3). Paul then went on to share why he could have confidence in the flesh had he chosen to; his pedigree as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church was a badge of honor in the first century (Phil 3:4-7). But he wrote that he counted it all as rubbish; it was trash compared to what

he'd gained in knowing and being found in Christ (Phil 3:8-10). Paul would do anything to become like his Savior and to obtain the prize of being with Christ for eternity (Phil 3:11).

Paul hadn't yet obtained this great gift, but he was willing to suffer, to deny himself, and to die in the name of Jesus as he waited to obtain it. He was motivated. He had a clear goal and vision. He knew that the path toward that goal was filled with obstacles and was worth it. He pressed on toward the goal for the "prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

In the pages ahead, you and I will be thinking a lot about the race and how we finish it. And it's good for us to consider that we're called to this race. When my coach invited me to run that track event, my status as an individual athlete was transformed. I was no longer representing myself; I was representing the school and the team. It was bigger than me. In the same way, God, in his mercy and kindness, has given us a calling that trumps all earthly calls: we have a "heavenly calling" (Heb 3:1). Knowing that we are not our own and that we are called to this race by a gracious God who helps us run it—not only as his children but also as his ambassadors—helps us run with endurance.

When I was finishing the 4x400, had it been all about me, I would have given up. But knowing that it wasn't just about me helped me push through the pain. Similarly this race of faith I'm running isn't all about me—it's about Jesus. Remembering that Jesus is the author and perfecter of my faith, knowing that I'm an ambassador to the living God, and remembering that I will gain more of him keeps me focused properly

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on this race. You and I have been called to run, but it's not all about us. It's all about him who called us.

NOT AN EASY CALL

I thoroughly enjoy health and athletics. I've spent most of my life either doing a sport or teaching others about fitness. In my adulthood, fitness hasn't been just a hobby for me; at one time it was a career path. I taught group fitness classes, trained fitness instructors, and even owned a small fitness studio. Though I no longer do fitness professionally, it continues to be an important part of who I am.

Here's the thing I've learned about fitness: it takes time, effort, patience, falling on your face in agony at times, and lots and lots of enduring. You don't wake up one day, decide to run a marathon, and then run it that evening. You have to train your body and mind for months. You have to endure difficult workouts, setbacks, and the daily routine required. Even then, getting to the finish line may be a slow process. And some quit.

This is what it's like to run the Christian race as well. We learn how to work the muscles of godly pursuits that result in sanctification; this is our sacred endurance. I'm motivated as a believer not because I have to but because I get to. Yet obstacles, real-life struggles, hard circumstances, and ordinary life make running the life of faith difficult. I've had my fair share of difficulties, including the death of my father and sister, four miscarriages, and a number of other painful experiences and circumstances—from health scares to broken relationships. Church life hasn't always been sunshine and rainbows, especially because I'm part of an ethnic minority. During a

season of bitterness, repentance seemed a daily duty, and relief seemed far away.

All this to say, it won't be easy. But you and I have been called to endure, to walk worthily, and to be imitators of Christ. And we're compelled to continue the race because of the saving work that Jesus has accomplished for us, independent of any efforts of our own.

One difference between a track-and-field race and the Christian race is that in the second we don't finish in our own strength. We don't have to find every muscle fiber in our body and practice "mind over matter" to finish. Instead we have great promises in the Word of God that help us realize that he is running this race with us and that the Holy Spirit is at work within us to equip us and empower us in the race. God has ultimate control, and holding onto that reality can bring us rest and peace.

Our strength and abilities don't come through our own doing; you and I are equipped and strengthened by the Lord. Too often, however, this life of faith is confusing as we think through our circumstances and as we fight our personal battles with sin and temptation. How do these two fit together: are we truly saved by grace, or do we have to work really hard? Perhaps it seems you must earn your salvation and that the prize at the finish line depends completely on your own effort. Or maybe you've given up. Instead of running that difficult stretch, you collapsed and decided it was simply too hard, too painful, or too discouraging.

Maybe you've tried and tried, and now that you've tasted grace, you think the best way to finish the race is simply to run

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the race however you want. So instead of running the circle of the track, you're going to run zigzags, just because you can. Yes, you're free to do that, even if those zigzags aren't what the Master intended. Some leave the track entirely and pursue a different destination.

SO, WHAT DO YOU DO NOW?

How do you endure in fighting sin with faith? How exactly do you fight temptations? Do you even have endurance? Is it possible to work hard in fighting temptation and sin without becoming prideful and falling into the mindset that your salvation is based on your efforts rather than on grace? Is it better to throw up your hands in what feels like a pointless fight against sin and relish the unconditional love and grace of God?

Thankfully we're able to go to the Word of God and sort out some of this confusion. But some questions of this life won't be fully answered until we are with our Savior. Because God's Word has plenty to say, my hope and prayer is that by the end of this book, you and I will have a better understanding of how to finish the race and finish it well.

I'm not at the end of my race. I'm in my forties with a preteen and a teen to continue to raise, and I've been married for less than two decades. So I'm in the middle of my race, and I'm learning what it means to keep running. I pray that *Sacred Endurance* will be a means of grace to help you and me along the path.

In this book, I explore the importance of enduring, the grace available to us, the challenges we face, the pursuit of godliness, and the prize you and I can look forward to. You'll read stories

about the Christian life—sometimes successes, sometimes struggles—and about endurance and motivation to push on toward Jesus.

God commands us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. And he says that he will finish the good work he began in us (Phil 1:6). He who called us is faithful, and “he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:24). Our life is a fight of faith, and we’ll explore how to exercise spiritually for it. We’ll look at some of the character traits—such as perseverance, faithfulness, patience, sacrifice, and even risk—that are developed in us as we walk.

Let me also share what *Sacred Endurance* is *not* about. This book is not about theological debates on assurance or perseverance; it’s not about whether or not you can lose your salvation. I will not try to convince you to believe a certain doctrine. Instead I’ll work under the assumption that we will endure to the end. Enduring to the end doesn’t mean not failing (and by failing, I mean failing miserably); it means that when we come to our end, we’re still believing and trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We’re still repentant and resting in him. Let’s assume that if we’ve truly placed our faith and trust in the work of Jesus Christ, our salvation is secure.

Sacred Endurance helps us peek under the curtain of real-life struggles while running the race set before us. There are reasons people don’t endure to the end. What are they? Some theologians suggest that if a person doesn’t endure to the end, he or she was never a believer. Maybe. But we want to prepare for the reasons that make it simply hard to live, and we want to be able to say that out loud without shame. I hope we’ll see

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that we aren't alone in the struggle and that we can endure by God's grace.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So, what is the assumption we're working under as we think through enduring? I adopt the view laid out in the biblical theology book *The Race Set Before Us* by Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday. Consider this promise in Scripture: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). Likewise consider this warning: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off" (Rom 11:22). For some, these seem to contradict one another. So is God going to keep me in the end, or am I going to be cut off? There are varying views, but the view I will be working from believes this:

God's promises have their own function, namely, to establish belief in God who keeps his promises and to assure us that he is faithful to his people. . . . God's warnings and admonitions have their distinctive function. They serve to elicit belief that perseveres in faithfulness to God's heavenly call on us. . . . The warnings serve the promises, for the warnings urge belief and confidence in God's promises.³

In other words, the warnings and admonitions call for faith that endures to receive the prize. God will keep us to the end, and the warnings and admonitions in the Scriptures help guide

us toward that end. God's strength and his enduring faithfulness will enable us to get there. He has given us his Word as a means of grace and instruction. And he has given us his Spirit to help and equip.

What a gracious God! This is our sacred endurance: running the race of the Christian life set before us by the grace of God, through the strength of God, until the day we face our God.

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