

Growing in Faith Through Trials

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Great to be in church with you this morning. My aim today really is to encourage us to obey Romans 12.12, which was just read out to us at the beginning.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. That is, I want to really exhort us to be patient followers of Jesus Christ who stand firm in faith and in fact flourish in faith in Jesus through the tough experiences of life.

And I sense that in the last couple of years, we've had a few of those. And for some of us, they've got nothing to do with pandemics, but have other issues in life that are just ongoing and enduring. And the reality is when it comes to tough seasons in life, which the reality is we all face. That's part of being human. We all face those tough minds.

It's got nothing to do with whether you're a Christian or not. It's just the reality is if you haven't yet hit those times, you will. They will come. It's by virtue of living in this world.

[1 : 1 5] We need help here because one of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. We are so easily offended.

We moop easily. We break easily. Our relationships break easily. Our faith breaks easily. Our happiness just breaks. It's just so fleeting.

Our commitment to church breaks. We are so easily disheartened. The concept of endurance is not something that you would call our society.

When history looks back on us, it's not going to say we were just persevering, enduring people. It seems that I think, it seems that we have little capacity for surviving, let alone thriving in tough times, in the face of criticism, opposition, pandemics, persecution, trials, whatever they might be. So when you're surrounded by a society that's like that, and I would argue by also in a church culture in the West that's like that, that is of, to quote someone else, a culture of emotionally fragile quitters.

[2 : 3 7] And frankly, when you see some of that culture within yourself, we need to spend time with people whose lives prove that there is another way to live, to thrive in the hard times.

Now what I've personally found really helpful over the years is it's really helpful to snuggle up close to people who have overcome great trials in obedience to God by the power of God's grace.

Most of those people are dead. And therefore, I want to encourage you to read Christian biography. Read about their lives. It has helped me so much over the years.

It gives you perspective on what you're currently going through. And so I want to do that today. I want to see Romans 12.12 worked out in the life of a man who was a sinner, like you and me, who was a pastor and who year after year through trials and hardship did not yield to bitterness. Did not yield to apathy or withdraw into shopping, holidays, retreats, whatever it is to get that little bit of joy and happiness back into life.

[4 : 1 6] So I want to encourage you. I'm mightily helpful in reading of his biography by Hanley Mull, Charles Simeon, and also John Piper's *The Roots of Endurance*, where he looks at Simeon's life, Newton's life, and William Wilberforce's life.

I want to encourage you to grab resources like this and read it. You can do this. You don't need me to do this. But I'm going to basically give you a life of Charles Simeon this morning. April 1831, Simeon was 71 years old.

He'd been the pastor of Trinity Church in Cambridge for 49 years at this point. And he was asked by a friend how he had overcome the extraordinary opposition he had faced for 49 years of his ministry.

And he said, Now that's the perspective I want to have.

The perspective of endurance and joy even in the midst of trials. So if you've got the St. Paul's app, I've really got three things I want to talk about today.

[6 : 06] First of all, let's introduce the man, Simeon. Secondly, what were the nature of some of his trials? And thirdly, growing in faith through the trials.

So firstly, the man. Simeon lived for 77 years, 1758 to 1836. His father was a wealthy attorney, a religious man, but not a Christian.

We know virtually nothing of his mother. The assumption is that his mother died when he was but an infant.

At the age of seven, he was sent off to the Royal College of Eton with royalty and other highfalutin members of society in those days, the high members of society. He was there for 12 years.

The atmosphere at Eton in those days, by his own description, was irreligious and degenerate. He hated his time at Eton.

[7 : 03] He said he was exposed to things that no human being should be exposed to. At the age of 19, he went to Cambridge University. In the first four months at Cambridge University, he was brought to faith in Jesus Christ.

And the amazing thing about this is that God did it against all the remarkable odds of Simeon not meeting another single Christian at Cambridge.

It wasn't through the influence of other Christians. Mark that in our day and age when there's a heavy reliance upon me being responsible for the others coming to faith.

And even after he became a Christian, Simeon did not meet another Christian on campus for almost three years. He became a Christian during Easter, 1779.

I think this is remarkable having just gone through Easter myself. In the lead up to Easter, having just gone to Cambridge University, he was told that he was required to go to the Easter services, the chapel services, and that he was required to participate in communion.

[8 : 16] For some reason, and it's purely by the grace of God at this moment, for some reason, this irreligious man, he was terrified by that concept. Absolutely terrified about going to church and participating in communion.

So he decided to read some material in preparation for Easter service attendance. This is how he describes it in his journal in Passion Week.

That's the week leading up to Easter. I was reading Bishop Wilson on the Lord's Supper. The thought came to my mind. What? May I transfer all of my guilt to another?

Has God provided an offering for me that I may lay my sins on his head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my soul one moment longer.

Accordingly, I sought to lay my sins on the sacred head of Jesus. Jesus Christ is risen today.

[9 : 45] Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. And from that hour, peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul. This is a man, an irreligious man, purely by the grace of God, has had his heart transformed and filled with joy from that moment.

Easter. Easter. And the effect of his conversion was immediate and dramatic. He was well known for his extravagance of life.

He was known in Eton as a athletic, fancy dressing show-off. That continued into his early days at Cambridge University.

Immediately, it shifted upon his conversion into a life of simplicity. In May 1782, Simeon, not even 23, was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church.

He was appointed to Trinity Church in Cambridge as curating charge about six months later. He preached his first sermon there on the 10th of November, 1782, and he ministered there for 54 years.

[11 : 04] It's incredible. 54 years until his death on the 13th of November, 1836. He preached again and again and again for 54 years.

No concept of retirement. No concept of retirement for this man. He became known globally, in fact, not just in England, but globally, as a great preacher, Bible teacher, a trainer, an encourager, a young clergy, a key influencer in world mission, and a philanthropist.

He inherited a significant amount of money from his brother. He was a wealthy merchant. When his brother died, Simeon inherited the whole lot. Basically, he gave the majority of it away, used most of it that he held back for the sake of feeding the poor in Cambridge.

He never married. The biographies, interesting, don't say much about that, except there's always just like one line. He chose the life of celibacy so that he might serve Christ all them all.

Now, what has drawn me to him again and again over the years was his endurance, not just because of his 54 years at Trinity Church, but through all kinds of extraordinary trials in life.

[12:33] Now, I'm not going to outline all of those for you this morning, but I'm going to pick on a few. The most fundamental trial that Simeon had in life was himself.

He was known to be somewhat of a harsh character. He had a harsh air about him. And for some, he was opinionated and arrogant and short-tempered.

And he himself acknowledges those things as his greatest bugbear, if you like, that he wanted transformed in his life. One day, he was off visiting another pastor.

And when he left to go back home, the daughters of this pastor went to their dad and said, my goodness, Mr. Simeon, what an arrogant, you know.

They just complained about him, complained about his manner and his attitude and all that sort of stuff. And this pastor, who was an older man who just had perspective on all this stuff and perspective on Simeon, took his girls outside, and this is how it's recorded.

[13:52] He said to them, pick me one of those peaches out in the backyard, you know, the peach tree. Pick me one of those peaches. And it's recorded, but it's early summer.

And the time of peaches was not yet. They asked, why would you want a green, unripened fruit to their dad? And he replied, well, my dears, it is green now and we must wait.

Little more sun, few more showers, and the peach will be ripe and sweet. So it is with Mr. Simeon. The second source of his trials was his church.

The vicar of the Holy Trinity died in October 1782. Bishop York, who was the bishop of the area at the time, appointed Simeon as curate in charge. But the parishioners of the church did not want Simeon to be their vicar.

They wanted the assistant curate, a guy named Mr. Hammond, to be the vicar instead. And so the first thing this congregation did in rebellion against Simeon was they refused to allow him to preach what was known as the afternoon lecture.

[15:16] This was an independently funded thing, a congregation, if you like, independently funded congregation. And Mr. Hammond was independently funded.

And it was highly influential. And they refused to allow Simeon to be part of it. For five years, they assigned that role to Mr. Hammond.

And when Mr. Hammond left, instead of turning it over to Simeon, they employed someone else, another independent person, for another seven years. So imagine serving in a church for 12 years.

12 years that they were so resistant to your ministry that they would refuse to let you preach on a Sunday afternoon. And they hired an assistant to keep you out of the pulpit.

Simeon tried to start a Sunday evening service. But the church wardens locked the doors so that people couldn't get inside the building. While they were actually waiting outside to get into the building, they rocked up, locked the doors so no one could get in.

[16:27] The congregation back in those days didn't have seats like this. They had pews with door locks on the end of the pews because your family owned the pew. And the church members, the congregation, locked the doors of their pews on Sunday mornings when they walked out so that no one could sit in their pews.

And they refused to come to church. So you've got a church full of seats with the pews locked and you weren't allowed to sit in those seats.

Simeon, in reaction to that, set up chairs all down the aisles around him on the stage area and there was a bit of room.

The church wardens turned up and threw all the chairs out in the street. When he went to visit his parishioners, hardly a single door in Cambridge opened to him.

He records the slamming of doors in his face again and again and again for 12 years. But it wasn't just for 12 years.

[17:44] In 1812, after he had been ministering there for 30 years, there was again, he doesn't describe it, but a further big opposition that formed against his ministry that lasted another four years.

In his own description, he says those four years were harder than that first 12 years. The third source of his trials was the university, Cambridge University, where he was effectively the chaplain

of the university.

For years, he was slandered with all kinds of rumours. The students of Cambridge University held Simeon in such contempt for his biblical preaching.

They repeatedly disrupt his services. They cause riots outside the streets around the church. On one occasion, the students banded together and plotted to assault Simeon on the way home from church.

By God's grace, he took a different route home on that particular day. The students who were converted through Simeon's ministry were also shunned and ridiculed in the university.

[19 : 03] They were called Sims. And their way of thinking was called Simeonites or Simeonisms. There was also the shunning and the coldness of his peers in the university.

One of the lecturers scheduled Greek classes on a Sunday afternoon and a Sunday night to prevent students from going to Simeon's evening services.

Deliberately did that, stated publicly that this is the reason why they're programmed here. He records in his diary what a delight it was on one particular day where one of his peers in the university went for a stroll with him for 15 minutes and conversed.

Imagine writing that in your journal. Highlight of the day. Someone decided to talk with me.

In another instance, one of the students was denied an academic prize he had earned because of his Simeonism.

[20 : 21] The fourth source of his trial was his physical weakness. In 1807, after 25 years of ministry, he describes his health as breaking. It just all of a sudden failed.

And that condition, whatever it was, lasted for 13 years. Some have speculated it was like a chronic fatigue kind of a thing or something like that.

But he doesn't describe what it is. Lasted for 13 years until he was 60 years old. All the time, Simeon pressed on in his work.

Just kept going with it. And his interpretation of those 13 years of weakness, physical weakness, is incredible. When he looks back on those 13 years, he says, I had promised myself a very active life up to the age of 60 and then a good retirement.

And he says, Now it seems to me the master is saying, I laid you aside because you entertained with satisfaction the thought of resting from your labor. But that now you have arrived at the very period when you had promised yourself that satisfaction and have determined instead to spend your strength for me to the latest hour of your life.

[21 : 52] I have doubled, trebled, quadrupled your strength that you may execute your desire on a more extended plan.

At 60 years of age, Simeon renewed his commitment to the mission of the church. He preached vigorously for the next 17 years until two months before he died.

Throughout his many trials, what you see in the life of Simeon is not someone who just endured it. This is not just someone who's stoic.

He didn't just endure it. He flourished. He grew. He was transformed in character again and again.

How did he keep going? Here's a few thoughts. I run through some of these relatively quickly.

There's a number of them, but I've only just picked a couple. Firstly, one reason for his endurance in his ministry, he had a very strong sense of his accountability before God for the souls of his flock.

[23 : 04] Whether they liked him or not, he saw it that he was accountable to God for them. He was not commissioned by them for his role in ministry, but by the Lord.

So very strong drive in the sense of accountability to God. Secondly, I think quite significantly, Simeon dealt with his opponents in a forthright, face-to-face way.

He suggested that there was a lot of evil that could be averted simply by doing things face-to-face and conversing about issues rather than clashing with each other.

There was an instance where a fellow minister wrote pamphlets about Simeon and accused him of all sorts of things. He's heretic and blah, blah, blah.

And Simeon's response was to sit down with the guy and let's talk. Come to an understanding of who I am and what my beliefs are.

[24 : 11] So he's very keen on that idea to take his opponents on face-to-face and sit down and converse, rather than fire up stuff on Facebook and cancel.

Thirdly, quite significantly, I think, Simeon could take a rebuke and grow from it. You recall how he interpreted his 13 years of weakness from ages 47 to 60 as a rebuke from the Lord for his intention to retire at the age of 60.

He was not embittered by that 13-year rebuke. He was, in fact, pushed forward by that. And it was the same when the rebukes came from people, from either friends or from enemies.

The sentiment for him was James 1, verse 2. If I suffer with a becoming spirit, my enemies, though unwittingly, must of necessity do me good.

He heard rebukes even from his enemies and grew from it. And his friends rebuked him as well.

You see it a number of times in the biography, them writing to him and his reply, thank you, thank you, thank you.

[25 : 36] He had a bad temper. And one day, he was visiting a friend of his, a Mr. Hankinson. And he became irritated because Hankinson's servant was stoking the fire wrong.

You know, in Simeon's words, such an unscientific way. I'm not sure exactly what that means. And Simeon whacked the guy on the back. Whacked him on the back.

And then when he was leaving, I'm not sure it was the same person, mixed up the bridles, put the wrong bridle on Simeon's horse. And Simeon lost it.

Mr. Hankinson wrote a letter as if it was from his servant. And he shoved it into Simeon's bag.

Simeon found it, the letter, eventually. And the letter was this. That he did not see how a man who preached and prayed so well could be in such a passion about nothing.

[26 : 50] And wear no bridle on his tongue. And he signed it, John softly. Simeon responded with the letter as if to the servant, to John softly, from Charles, proud and irritable.

We can learn stuff from this. I most cordially thank you, my dear friend, for your kind and seasonable reproof.

He also wrote a separate note to his friend Hankinson. I hope, my dearest brother, that when you find your soul nigh to God, you remember one who so greatly needs all the help he can get.

How do you respond when people criticise your ideas? Fourthly, Simeon found ways to look at discouraging things, hopefully.

I love this about Simeon because I think it's something that I need to see myself. I want to see this transformation myself. When the members of his congregation locked their pews and they kept locking it for over 10 years, Simeon said, in this state of things, I saw no remedy but faith and patience.

[28 : 21] It was painful indeed to see the church, with the exception of the isles, almost forsaken. But I thought that if God would only give a double blessing to the congregation that did attend, there would, on the whole, be as much good done as if the congregation were doubled and the blessing limited to only half the amount.

This comforted me many, many times when, without such a reflection, I would have sunk under my burden. Fifthly, Simeon saw his suffering as a privilege of bearing the cross of Christ.

He describes one time being buffeted and afflicted in his words, buffeted and afflicted because he was such an object of scorn and derision, not just within his church, but within the community surrounding the church.

He prayed earnestly to God that he would support him from his word. And so he opens the Bible for devotional life and he read there about Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Jesus up to Golgotha. And he wrote this in his journal, you know, Simon is the same name as Simeon. What a blessed hint for my encouragement.

[29 : 54] To have the cross laid upon me that I might bear it after Jesus. What a privilege. It was enough. Now I can leap and sing for joy as one whom Jesus has honoured with a participation in his suffering.

Now that is no ordinary perspective on tough circumstances. So how was he able to respond like that with such suffering?

Now we need to dig a bit deeper here because those are some of the traits of his endurance and how he endured. But there is deeper stuff, much deeper stuff.

The roots, if you like, of his endurance. We get a step closer to the roots of his endurance.

When we notice that Simeon strengthened himself with massive, and I want to use that word again, massive doses of meditation and prayer.

[31 : 04] Devotional life. Massive doses of a devotional life. A friend of Simeon's said this about him in this discipline. Simeon.

Simeon. Simeon. Simeon. He was comforted in all his trials and prepared for every duty. However, Hanley Mole writes in his biography that this early rising did not come easily to him.

It was a habit that he resolutely fought for and acquired. Finding himself too fond of his bed, he had resolved to pay a fine for every offence, giving half a crown to his servant.

Every time he slept in, he paid a fine. One morning, he did not want to get out of bed and he thought to himself, what my servant could do with the extra cash?

Realising that that was nothing but an excuse, he got out of his bed and he threw a guinea, a lot more money, into the local river and said, I will do that every time I sleep in from now on.

[32 : 58] And because, in his own words, guineas were hard to come by, he never slept in again. Do you like your bed?

He fought to be a disciplined man of the word and prayer. It did not come naturally. It wasn't a personality thing. It was the secret of his great grace and strength, but it wasn't the deepest secret. There's something even deeper. It's what he experienced when he went to the word. That's the deepest secret of his endurance through suffering.

I think Mole's biography captures the essence of Simeon's secret of endurance in this sentence. Before honour is humility.

And he had been growing downwards year by year under the stern discipline of difficulty met in the right way, the way of close and adoring communion with God.

[34 : 10] That is, he wasn't just reading his Bible, he was commuting with God in his Bible. And these two things were the heartbeat of Simeon's spiritual life, growing downward in humility and growing upward in adoring communion with God.

And the remarkable thing about this in Simeon's life is that humility and adoration were inseparable for him. The own crushing in his pride and his joy in worship of God were inseparable.

They had to walk together. Here's another quote from him. He'd been a Christian for 40 years when he wrote this. I have never thought that the circumstances of God having forgiven me was any reason why I should forgive myself.

On the contrary, I have always judged it better to loathe myself the more in proportion. There should be underlying that word. In proportion.

As I was assured that God was pacified towards me. There are but two objects that I have desired for these 40 years to behold.

[35 : 32] The one is my own vileness, my own sinfulness, if you like. And the other is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And I've always thought that they should be viewed together.

As John Piper says, if Simeon is right on that point, then vast slabs of contemporary Christianity is wrong.

Vast slabs of contemporary Christianity is wrong. That is for him, adoration of Christ, adoring of God, worship of God, grew in the freshly plowed soil of his humiliation for his own sin.

He actually labored again and again and again in his devotional life to know his true sinfulness and his remaining corruption as a Christian.

Simeon had no fear of turning up every sin in his life and looking upon it with great fear and grief and hatred.

[36 : 54] Because he had such a vision of Christ's sufficiency for him and forgiveness for him. And it would always result in a deeper cleansing and adoration.

He wrote, the tender heart, the broken and contrite spirit are to me far above all the joys that I could ever hope for in this veil of tears. I long to be in a proper place, into my proper place, my hand on my mouth and my mouth in the dust.

I feel that this is safe ground. Here I cannot err. I am sure that whatever God may despise, he will not despise the broken and the contrite heart.

Humiliation for his own sin, adoring of God, growing upwards in his adoration and joy in Christ, they were wound together. He grew downward in the pain of repentance and he grew upward in his joy in worship.

And the weaving of these two experiences together into one experience was the achievement of the cross of Christ and the deepest secret of his great perseverance.

[38 : 09] That is, Simeon's great passion in his devotional life was the contemplation of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This for him was the constant reminder of salvation by grace and that he was dead to the pleasures, the riches and the honours of this world.

That is, for Simeon, he got to a point in his life where the admiration of people did not attract him at all and the condemnation of people did not wound him at all.

He was satisfied in Christ, content. He never assumed for a moment that he was deserving of a different life but considered it a joy.

And in that sense, he embodies the message of Hebrews 12 that was just read out to us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Consider him endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

[39 : 33] Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons. God disciplines us for our own good that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful.

Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. As Simeon lay dying in October 1836, a friend sat beside him and asked him what are you thinking now, Mr Simeon?

Almost the last thing he said was I don't think now, I'm enjoying. I'm enjoying. I'm enjoying. Hope, endurance prayer and prayer are natural partners in Romans 12.

12. Even as we rejoice in the hope we have in Jesus Christ, gaining confidence from God's promise that we will share eternal glory with him, we recognise that the path to that glory is scattered with all kinds of trials and tribulations designed by God that we might get to the point of a Simeon and say enjoying.

I'm enjoying. Given the weight of glory that will be for those who are in Christ Jesus, I agree with Simeon, we must not mind a little suffering.

[41 : 14] Thank you.