



GRACE CHURCH

Fragility, Fortitude, and Focus

Hebrews 12:1-2

Grace Church | 3.5.23

In 2015, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt released an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “The Coddling of the American Mind”, which later became a book of the same title. Here is how he begins the article:

Something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense... Two terms has risen from obscurity into common campus parlance: “microaggressions” are small actions or words choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent, but are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless... and “trigger warnings”, alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in the course might cause a strong emotional response.¹

Haidt goes on to sound the alarm that it is possible that by doing everything we can to avoid giving offense, we might actually be *harming drastically* the development of young people, not improving it. The reason being that we may in fact be creating an educational culture that is not preparing students for the harsh realities of life. As it turns out, endurance is built not by avoiding hardship, but by leaning into it.

It’s of course very possible that Jonathan Haidt is overreacting. We must be very careful not to create a caricature of our cultural moment—and imagine that everyone under the age of 30 is always teetering on the edge of emotional breakdown. But it is worth noticing, and asking the question: how equipped are we, in the world we live in today, to endure the hardships of life?

Remember that the book of Hebrews was written to address a similar need. The audience of the letter is in need of endurance. They must be encouraged not to quit on Jesus, not to go back to lesser glories when the going gets tough. And so for the next two weeks the book of Hebrews will help us to understand what it takes to develop what we might call a theology of fortitude: the ability, by faith, to trust God when it is hard and endure. So today will be more a setting of the table, and next week we will dig into the meat—this week I want us to focus on three things: our need for fortitude, our problem of fragility, and our focus on Christ. Next week then we will dive into the fuel for fortitude, which is the discipline of God.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>



The Need: Fortitude.

Jumping into the text we are immediately met with a vivid illustration. Coming off the heels of chapter 11, our minds are full with example after example of faithful men and women who, despite their sin and despite the uncertainty of God's promises in the moment, trusted God. They kept going, they finished. And now they are imagined to be surrounding us like a "great cloud". The word for "cloud" was used quite regularly to speak of a crowd—but specifically when a crowd was dense, close, imminent. Notice too in **verse 1** the cloud of witnesses is *great*, that is, full of men and women of great faith and also immense in size and scale.

What is it they are witnessing? The author imagines a great colosseum, a track, full of spectators. The exhortation in **verse 1** is to throw aside all hindrances, just like an ancient athlete would throw aside their outer garments (sometimes even competing in the nude!) in order to run a race. What is interesting here is the word "race", transliterated from the Greek is "*agon*", which you recognize as the root for words like agony or agonize. The race in view is not a friendly jaunt or a morning jog: it is commonly translated as "struggle" or "conflict". It's also very possible the author has in mind the most popular of Greco-Roman races—the pentathlon—which includes not just sprints but also javelin throwing, discus throwing, and at its climax, a knockdown, dragout, fight until blood is drawn kind of wrestling match. The race of life, says Hebrews, is hard, long, and most of all, grueling. You will not make it to the end faithful without endurance, and you will not make it if you are weighed down by other cares and your own sin.

To get a better sense of the image here being presented, I asked our friend Rich Eva to give some insight. You may not know this, but Rich is not just an aspiring philosopher—he was also a collegiate wrestler. I asked Rich "how do you succeed in wrestling?" And to no one's surprise, he told me *endurance*, pushing through, especially late when you are tired, and especially when you have a lead and are tempted to let up. So then I asked him: "how are you able to have endurance in the moment of weakness?" And he told me that in the moment of wrestling, the key to endurance is to trust that you have put in the work, the discipline beforehand, to train your body better than your opponent. If you believe yourself to be better trained and disciplined, then you will find it much easier to hold on and outlast your opponent.

This is also what the scripture says is needed. We must have **endurance** in the face of hardship (run with endurance), and in order to have endurance we must have **discipline** (laying aside every weight/sin which clings closely, preparing for the time of endurance, getting lighter/stronger). This happens by you (Paul says "I discipline my body and make it my servant"), but only because it happens for you (God disciplines those he loves). The discipline piece we will have to wait on until next week.

First, a few notes about the witnesses. Obviously, this raises the stakes: one author compares it to shooting hoops alone in an empty gym, when all of a sudden Micahel Jordan asks if he can join in. Immediately you try your best, even if it comes woefully short, to elevate your game. But in many



ways it is also encouraging, which I think is the author's point here. Remember Dave said a few weeks ago that when we look at the lives of Abraham, Moses, David, all these heroes of the faith, we are tempted to believe "I could never do that". But the reality is, the same faith that they possess is also ours, and in fact Hebrews 11 says that God has provided something "better" for us, that is, we actually have witness to Jesus in the flesh, the very object of our faith! And this is how the cloud of witnesses encourages us—we know that it is possible to endure. We know that God has been faithful in the past. We know that their faith is our faith, and their faith surrounds us even now, not antagonistic, but spurring us onward.

So there is a great need for fortitude, because life is not easy—it's a struggle, an agony, a race. But there is a great possibility—it has been done before. But let's turn now to the problem, or the hindrances.

The Problem: Fragility.

In the example of a great race, we obviously know that we won't be able to finish well if we are not prepared. So what I want to do is actually examine the requirements listed here from a negative perspective. Look at the three requirements in **verse 1**: 1) lay aside every weight; 2) lay aside sin which clings closely; and 3) run with endurance. What is so difficult about unburdening ourselves and pushing through? I'd like to highlight three problems we encounter with the call to fortitude.

1. We blame-shift instead of throwing off sin.

Think back to the coddling of the mind from earlier. It is very, very, easy to have a victim mentality. And I want to be careful here: all of us in some way *are* victims to the realities of sin. Our hardship is not always our fault. The world is full of evil and injustice, injustice that Jesus weeps over, that he has righteous anger over. One day, all those wrongs will be right. And it's not all your fault. Some of us have felt this more than others—so do not hear me heaping blame on you if you have been the victim of real tragedy, abuse, violence, or wickedness.

And yet, at the same time, we must be careful of the mentality that naturally assumes that we are never the problem. See, the author of Hebrews is trying to prepare his audience for suffering and persecution, he is trying to prepare them for evil and suffering to come against them! And yet, he still encourages them: if you are going to prepare for hardship, you must learn to throw off sin. It clings closely he says, it's the hardest thing to see. But if you never get down into the business of identifying, repenting of, and putting to death your sin, it will eat you up.

See, one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life is that if we want to grow strong and resilient, we have to first acknowledge our weakness. Before we can grow in holiness, we have to grow in awareness of our unholiness. Before we can throw off sin, we have to lament our sinfulness. This is very practical, and I think it has less to do with extreme suffering and far more to do with everyday temptations to abandon our faith. For example, our boss at work is really getting on our nerves.



There is real injustice, maybe even going on, they are treating us poorly. How do we endure in that moment—well, one way we can endure is complaining, grumbling, blaming. It feels good in the moment—and I don't mean real acknowledgement of pain and hurt—I mean it releases some of that pressure, it fires us up. But in the end, it's exhausting. And see, it drains our faith. It's like moving backwards—it's trusting in the feeling of blame-shifting instead of, by faith in Christ's finished work, throwing off sin.

2. We heap-on instead of casting off weight.

What does it mean to “lay aside every weight”? I actually think this is different from the casting off of sin, although related. The word is encumbrance, something that restricts us. Notice while sin clings to us, this weight has the connotation of being something we have willfully put on. And perhaps this might even be something that you see as *positive*, and yet nevertheless, it is dragging you down.

If I might be so bold, perhaps the most socially acceptable form of this in our church is our habit of taking on far too much than we can bear. It's over-working, even over-sacrificing, heaping on burdens left and right—the burden of every social evil, the burden of every need, and every opportunity to prove ourselves. Perhaps I can strike a bit of a chord here, but maybe you have never thought through the fact that your propensity to take yourself too seriously is a severe lack of faith. It's taking on weight that you were never meant to. Now again, there are caveats. The whole point of this text is that God calls us to difficult things! But listen—we are not God. Again, Christian strength and fortitude is not found in our ability to bear the weight of the world on our shoulders. It's found in understanding what God is calling us to endure and bear by his grace, and where he is calling us to let go and trust him.

Perhaps I can quickly press into an area where you may feel this. Parents feel this desire when we try to take on their children's burdens as our own. Instead of trusting God with our children, it is all too easy to shield them from the consequences of their own actions, or fret over and micromanage how they will turn out. But we end up heaping on hindrances to our faith and maybe even to theirs.

Here is another example. Maybe even it's your perceived own toughness which is hindering you from running the race! In complete juxtaposition to the “coddling” of the mind, your experience was that from basically birth, no one coddled you. Maybe you are the kind of man or woman who was forced to endure hardship from an early age, or thrown into the world before you perhaps were ready. Good for you, you say, since you learned how to deal with growing up. And yet, again notice how *you* have shouldered all the weight in your story... No one has ever handed anything to you, you've had to fight for everything you have... But that very mindset is a hindrance to the open-handed reception of God's grace. Christian endurance is not found from buckling down and white-knuckling our way through, it is found in opening up our hands, knowing our weakness, throwing off the trust in our own ability, and running by faith. Because yes, you may be tough. But no one overcomes death and true suffering by relying on their own thick skin.



3. We quick-fix instead of enduring.

The word for *endurance* in **verse 1** literally means “hyper-remain” or “hyper-stand”. The idea is that endurance is standing still and not turning back, running away, or changing course. So let me let you in on a secret: we are desperately bad at standing still, especially in hardship. We are far too easily distracted.

This week pastor Dave sent me an article by Alan Jacobs that outlined this well.² Jacobs' primary point was this: very few of us suffer from true “troubling of the mind”, because we cannot remain undistracted enough to really feel truly happy or sad. We live in an age of “technological disruption”, meaning we are constantly bombarded with solutions to problems we may not even have known we had.

For instance, where do you go when you start to feel sad, bored, or stressed? Right in your pocket is the capacity to hear from a trusted spiritual advisor, to book an appointment with a therapist who you've never met, to access thousands of advice columns, to watch millions of hours of video content, to connect instantly with a friend or receive validation through a connection, to bury your feeling through shopping or browsing for things you can't afford, or most likely of all, to just scroll and consume without really *doing* anything. Instead of standing still in the face of trouble, we bury our real selves in a mountain of quick-fix solutions.

Some issues cannot be solved with technical solutions. Some issues cannot be scrolled away or ignored until they stop. And friends, your endurance in the faith is such an issue. It's not just phones, either—as if dumping your iPhone could offer instant endurance. When we run into hardship, challenges to our trust in God—we are tempted to change course. Abandon worship, stop praying, switch it up. But we hardly ever make wise decisions in those moments. God is calling us to trust him, and stand still—even when we cannot yet see what he is doing.

Now, that is a lot of potential hindrances to our endurance. What is the solution? As we will see next week, the solution is to submit ourselves to the training and discipline of the Lord, knowing that he is always making us into those who endure.

But before we get to the discipline next week, we must not miss this. No runner can endure the race without a goal. An endless race is just eternal torture with no purpose. That is not what the Christian life is: it has a goal, an end, a prize. What is the finish line of the race of faith? What is our focus? **Verse 2** tells us it's Jesus.

² See Alan Jacobs, “Habits of Mind in an Age of Distraction” in *Comment Magazine*
<https://comment.org/habits-of-mind-in-an-age-of-distraction/?fbclid=IwAROV3GEDYxtAM8qavJFQpiXpX-CzFSrePeOpQII3eO3trkHXp41oQ3ht0eA>



The Focus: Jesus Christ.

Christian fortitude is not about lifting more, doing more, and being a more impressive Christian. It is about making it to the end. Already we've seen this in Hebrews (the promised land/rest image). Dave said it two weeks ago too—it's not about the amount or intensity of your faith, it is about the object. Christian fortitude is not about being stronger than others, it's about accepting weakness and suffering as God's means of strengthening you in Christ.

But it's not as if we should see away our hardship as if God is a coldhearted trainer who pushes us in the gym while he himself won't put in the work. No, the goal of the Christian life is not to impress God. The goal is to *get* God, and the way we get God is by following in the footsteps of— by trusting and being swallowed up in and united to—Jesus, the one who put in the work.

He never once shifted blame: although he was blameless he instead took all of our blame on him. **He threw off every hindrance,** not heaping on himself a desire for glory or praise, but emptying himself and taking on the form of a servant.

He never was satisfied with a quick fix, even when tempted by Satan to revive the whole world and avoid suffering, he was never distracted from his goal.

God in Christ is the ultimate example—he is the forerunner—the one who has gone before and endured. He weeps with us and for us, he knows our suffering, he understands the sting of sin. The Father treated Christ as a son, disciplining him—not because he was imperfect, but so that he would endure the same discipline that we endure, and be able to sympathize with us. The cross was his great race. The witnesses were assembled, all of Heaven drew its breath. He prepared himself—never sinning, in holiness throwing off all sin. And he prepared himself through suffering, and at his crucifixion literally stripped bare of his clothes, like the Roman athletes, and put to open shame. The focus of his race, where he set his eyes, was the joy of his Father, the joy of obedience, the joy of redemption. In other words, his focus was *you*—his bride, his prize. Jesus is God—he had no need to receive the prize of life with God. So when Jesus endured to the end, what he had on his mind, the ultimate goal, was the one thing that he did not yet have: you.

He endured not just physical agony and slow, torturous death, but the weight of the sin of the world, the wrath of God, and the injustices of humanity. He could have quit, laid down, taken himself from the cross. He endured the shame of our sin, the shame of the curse of the tree, the shame of a criminal's death, but by his endurance he despised that shame, threw it off. Now the cross is turned from a place of shame to a place of triumph and worship. Jesus showed that true Christian strength is not found in exercising power over others but through trusting God and enduring necessary suffering. And when Jesus endured the cross, he came from the grave a conquering king.

And the way we trust is by looking to Jesus, our forerunner. By focusing on him and his endurance. But we also remember that he is the finisher of our faith—the one who completes it. When we lack



endurance, he is working for us by the Spirit. He will not abandon us, forsake us, or leave us to die. We are sure to endure when we are found in him, because in him our faith will never truly falter. Christian fortitude is not about acting or looking stronger—it's about enduring to the end. And the only way you will ever endure is if by faith you throw all your weight on Jesus, who will carry you there.

