

Hardiness: The Spiritual Benefits of Adversity

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"Power" by Hansuan Fabregas, São Paulo, Brasil

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit,
illumine the sacred page, we pray,
that our minds may be open
to receive your Word,
our hearts taught to love it,
and our wills strengthened to obey it;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3 (NRSVue)

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart.

**The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.**

SERMON – Hardiness: The Benefits of Adversity

Libby Clegg is a gold medalist sprinter in 100 meter and 200 meter sprints and... Libby Clegg is blind. Visually impaired sprinters like Clegg race with a guide. The two are tethered together at either the hand or wrist. You need a guide who is not only fast and experienced, but someone you can trust entirely—they are your eyes on the track. Libby had known sprinter Chris Clarke for years. He himself has medaled in international competitions. They were a perfect match.



The guide's role is crucial. They let the runner know how far along they are on the track, where they are in relation to the other sprinters, and what they must do to win. Clegg and Clarke work in tandem—she follows his lead. The two become mirror images of one another.

Everything the guide does is for the purpose of helping the sprinter win the gold.



Libby Clegg and Chris Clarke together won two golds in the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio. They won the 100 meter sprint and also broke the world record in the 200 meters. And they both returned to a hero's welcome with hundreds waiting to greet them upon returning to London at Heathrow Airport.

“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” says the author of Hebrews, “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

We’re the runners, and Jesus is our guide in the race of faith. We’ve got to give it our all, but we could never do it without him. The Christian faith is not only a walk of faith, but a run of faith. We walk not by sight, but by faith. We also run not by sight, but by faith. And it’s usually not so much a sprint, but a marathon, requiring endurance and perseverance for the long haul.

Our morning’s passage tells us, by the grace of God, we have lots of help. We’re not alone. First, we’re surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses.” These are the great saints over the centuries who faithfully completed their race.

The previous chapter, Hebrews 11, is the great faith chapter in the New Testament. This famous definition of faith is found in it:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

We’re also given a tour of the Hall of Faith—seeing the highlight reels of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and other heroes of the faith who overcome insurmountable odds and trusted and obeyed God in times of uncertainty. They finished their race, but they stayed in the arena. They’re now in the stands cheering us on. Our race and their race are connected.

Our youngest daughter Phoebe did cross country this fall. And one of my most favorite parts was cheering her on in the final stretch. Parents, grandparents, and friends were all yelling out encouragements to the runners—*You got this! Keep it up! You’re almost at the finish line!* It was fun for us, and you could see the runner’s energy kick into high gear.

That’s what this great cloud of witnesses does for us. Their living example encourages us to persevere. To dig deeper. Not quit. Give it everything you’ve got. Keep your eyes on the prize. We study their lives from Scripture and history, taking pointers on how to keep on keepin’ on through all the zigs and zags, hurdles, and roadblocks of life. Another way to run with perseverance is to do our part, to “lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely.”

In the ancient Greek Olympics, competitors would literally strip down to nothing. Each would compete *au natural* so that nothing would hinder their movements. Thankfully today we have a different way—we wear aerodynamic clothing. Swimmers shave. We cut out anything that slows us down or creates unwanted resistance.

In the same way, in our faith we chuck whatever impedes our pilgrimage. Distractions, procrastination, materialism, an unhealthy spiritual diet. Gone. We also take stock of our lives, individually and corporately, and discern what unhealthy attitudes and harmful actions towards God, others, or ourselves we need to shed. We want nothing to thwart our goal of running well and finishing well. But most importantly Hebrews tells us, look to Jesus as our model. He’s the pinnacle, the supreme example for us. He’s the author, originator, pioneer, and forerunner of our faith. He’s our anchor. Looking to him for strength and guidance, he perfects and completes our

faith—helping us navigate and negotiate this earthly journey of ours. And helping us ultimately to say when it's our time, along with the Apostle Paul:

*"I have fought the good fight.
I have finished the race.
I have kept the faith."*

Like none other, Jesus guides and trains us on how to not only endure hardship with grace, but to keep joy fresh in our minds in the midst of it all—so we don't get despondent or hit the wall before the end.

Despite the brutality and stigma of the cross, joy prevailed for Jesus. He didn't let the cross keep him down. He never lost sight of joy. Didn't lose it. He endured. And he can get us through our shame and disappointment. Just keep your eyes on Jesus.

Cast off what's unnecessary. Put on the heart of Christ, all so we don't lose heart, get weighed down, or grow weary in our souls. But we are human, and it happens. When we get discouraged, dispirited, or depressed, it's easy to think that life would be most pleasurable if we could just entirely avoid stress, pain, hardship, or adversity.

But psychologist Brock Bastian of the University of Melbourne would disagree with you. In his insightful book **The Other Side of Happiness**, he sheds light on the importance of embracing and understanding pain to help us find purpose, meaning, and true joy in our lives.

It turns out avoiding or numbing our pain actually diminishes our ability to enjoy things in life. If seen in the right way, pain has the purpose of contrasting and even heightening our pleasure. When we see that pain has something to teach us, we're actually able to handle more pain. Fearing pain only makes it worse.

Bastian shares about how children from lower income families during the Great Depression were able to adapt better than children of upper-middle class backgrounds to new and unfamiliar situations. *Why?* They were less fearful because they had been exposed to, rather than insulated from, more painful and stressful events.

Another study found that marriages were stronger when couples faced manageable adversity in the early years of marriage compared to other couples who were shielded from challenges.

Exposure, not avoidance, strengthens our faith. What makes such things as childbirth, a completed project at work, running a marathon, giving sacrificially, or overcoming a disability so meaningful? They came at a great cost—there was risk, suffering, sweat, stress, uncertainty, effort and pain. The sacrifice deepened the sense of satisfaction. You were invested.

The good news is that there are important benefits of adversity available to us, if we can frame our difficulties as a **challenge**, rather than a **threat**. With the eyes of faith, and with Christ's help, we can see the redemptive nature of our pain. And this helps us to persevere and forge ahead, rather than throw in the towel.

Studies have found over and over these benefits of adversity:

Hardship brings people closer together. It opens people up to share more and lean on each other.

In the midst of our hardship, beliefs, and convictions, we didn't know that what we had could be revealed. New meanings and new horizons can emerge when our assumptions are broken down. But its only adverse experiences that take us to a new and deeper place. A life of ease can't do it.

God helps us to see our challenges as physical therapy or occupational therapy or a spiritual workout. When we're working out at the gym or in a physical therapy session after surgery, it's painful. When you're being stretched and pushed, you discover muscles you never thought you had. You want to either scream or die. In the middle of that exercise, you're hating life.

But this pain is what helps you recover. Get stronger. Have more mobility. And it's redemptive. Exercising—particularly running and lifting weights—have been proven to decrease depression. This principle applies to the spiritual life. The goal of life isn't to be pain-free. We'd never grow if we didn't have pain. We wouldn't ever be pushed or stretched. We wouldn't need to exercise our faith. And, we wouldn't have lasting joy. Adversity helps develop in us **hardiness**. Or as our passage calls it: **perseverance, endurance**.

Hardiness toughens you up. Tempers you. Makes you more resilient. When you're hardy you're committed to search for and find meaning in life. You believe that you *will* end up growing, not only from positive experiences, but also negative and difficult situations, even ones you never would have chosen.

And so as Christians, when we fix our eyes on Jesus, we have not only an example, but we have the strength to cope and hope in the midst of our difficulties. Or as the author of Hebrews tells us later in the chapter: *Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

So if you're running out of steam, losing sight of the goal, lagging behind, or tempted to give up: Gaze upon Jesus, fix your eyes upon him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and he'll help you shake off your sluggishness, so you can press on and prevail to the very end—rejoicing evermore.

Amen.

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