



WHY WE
NEED A
FIGHTING
FAITH

AIMEE BYRD

God has promised to persevere his own, yet Christians aren't passive in the process. In fact, living the Christian life is a real workout. It's a process that leads to what Aimee Byrd calls "theological fitness." With deep insight, biblical soundness, and practical illustrations, Aimee shows readers how to "hold fast . . . without wavering" (Heb. 10:23) all the way to the end.

—**Lydia Brownback**, Author, Speaker, and Blogger

The deeply informed Old Testament connections and the rich christological truth so famously given us in the book of Hebrews are intended to shape its very basic challenge to *hold fast* to Christ with a gospel-informed perseverance. This is just what Aimee does not miss, but drives the point home vividly in her distinctive, memorable, and popular style. A challenging yet enjoyable and valuable exhortation, and a pleasure to commend.

—**Fred G. Zaspel**, Pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, Franconia, Pennsylvania

If you think all exercise is drudgery, you're not doing it right. On the other hand, if building strength and stamina exhilarates you, you're more likely to persevere and achieve a greater measure of fitness. That's as true of our souls as it is of our bodies. If the pursuit of theological fitness sounds tedious to you, you're in danger of becoming a spiritual couch potato.

Aimee Byrd is here to help. She's the very best kind of theological sensei—an enthusiastic encourager, not a dour drill sergeant. She knows the joy of biblical and theological understanding, and it's an infectious delight. She shows how to gain and maintain theological fitness—and how to find great enjoyment in the exercise.

—**Phil Johnson**, Executive Director, *Grace to You* Radio Program

Like a good physical trainer pushes and encourages and equips and is clear about the rigors as well as the rewards of physical fitness, so Aimee Byrd, using the words of the writer of Hebrews, pushes and encourages and equips readers in *Theological Fitness*. In this Scripture-saturated book we are rightly warned of the rigors as well as promised the rewards of holding fast to Christ when we feel the burn and want to give up.

—**Nancy Guthrie**, Bible Teacher; Author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible Study Series*

What a gem this book is—so full of encouragement and so honest and genuine. We see from Aimee what perseverance looks like on the ground, and at the same time her wonderfully practical and readable book is grounded in good theology.

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, Associate Dean, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

THEOLOGICAL FITNESS

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FAITH**

AIMEE BYRD



P U B L I S H I N G
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To my mom and dad, Margie and Blaine,
who exemplify the life of fitness.

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.” —BRUCE LEE

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FOREWORD

It is a pleasure to commend the following book to you. Aimee Byrd is a friend, a cohost—with myself and Todd Pruitt—of the podcast *Mortification of Spin*, where she is the longsuffering target of the show's jokes (and indeed one who gives as good as she gets in that regard). She is also someone who feels passionately about theology and wants the church as a whole to love theology too.

But Aimee is not a theological brain on a stick. She is a wife and a mother. She is also a fitness fanatic, and in this book she uses the notion of fitness and physical training as a theme for exploring what it means to be a vibrant, theologically aware Christian. Indeed, the reader will find here not only great practical discussion of the everyday importance of theology but also lots of good advice on the benefits of physical fitness.

Of course, fitness was revolutionized for women in the '80s when Jane Fonda launched her workout videos and famously called on people everywhere to feel the burn. As I read this book, I could not avoid a mental image of Aimee barking out theological instructions to the beat of some ghastly '80s disco track. That may not be the most compelling image, but there is an analogy here: Fonda was a trailblazer who made it clear that being strong and fit was not a male preserve. Aimee is similar: one of a growing band of Reformed women who want to know theology and encourage others to do the same. She may not be demanding that we

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all feel the burn, but she is calling on us to understand what we believe in a thoughtful—indeed, a fit—way.

Carl R. Trueman
Paul Woolley Professor of Church History
Westminster Theological Seminary

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An author labors away in front of a computer with an imaginary audience in mind, the readers. So I would like to extend my gratitude to every one of my readers taking the time to read my words. It is truly an honor.

The acknowledgments page gives me hope amongst all that is quickly changing in this world. Imagine if every product that you bought had an acknowledgments section. How many opportunities do we really have to thank the people who support our work? And authors can be a strange bunch, so we really do need to thank our loved ones for putting up with us as we try to work that manuscript out of our brain and present it to the public.

And so I thank my husband, Matt, for his ongoing encouragement in support, interview preps, editorial insights, and pretending that the house and I still look good on those busier writing days. Who knows the gratitude I owe him just for listening to all my ramblings? My kids, Solanna, Zaidee, and Haydn, just like to see their name in print, so I do thank them for being awesome. I am deeply grateful for the honor I had to teach the sermon-letter to the Hebrews to the women's Bible study in my last church, Pilgrim Presbyterian. Those women are a beautiful picture of theological fitness and perseverance. This book is a fruit that came from that study, along with the prayers of that amazing bunch. I am proud to run the race with you women. I should also mention that the concept of theological fitness first came to my mind when a Sunday school teacher and elder at

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Pilgrim, Mike VanDerLinden, taught a lesson on Hebrews 12:1–2. Thank you to my previous pastor, Jerry Mead, for looking over chapter 10 for me. Many thanks go to Todd Pruitt for looking my manuscript over in detail and sharpening some of my ideas in responding to all my questions.

I grew up in a unique atmosphere when it comes to fitness. Our garage was converted into a dojo, where my dad taught martial arts and my mom taught aerobics to the neighbors. Mom eventually opened a gym, and dad was also in the Secret Service for a while. This experience has led to a mind-set and discipline that crosses over well to the field of theological fitness. It has also given me great stories and analogies to use in discussing our conditioning in the Word of God. My parents are an exceptional gift from the Lord. I also need to thank my dad, as well as my brother, Luke, for passing along their awesome nunchuck skills for the book trailer. Luke is to be thanked for producing the video as well.

My experience with P&R has been a true delight. Special thanks go to Ian Thompson, Bryce Craig, and Amanda Martin for meeting with me to determine what shape this book would take. It's like a family over there, and I enjoy working with everyone. I very much appreciate all the labor—from the editorial work, the art department (who has to put up with my crazy suggestions), my project manager to the marketing team, and my sensei—project manager, Aaron Gottier. And after having the pleasure of visiting the P&R warehouse, I am grateful to the men who box up the books and ship them out. And payroll, can't forget payroll.

Also important to the formation of this book are the readers of my blog.¹ I've tested some of the content of this book on *Housewife Theologian* and have so benefited from the encouragement and sharpening I continually receive from my readers.

1. Aimee Byrd, *Housewife Theologian* (blog), Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, <http://www.housewifetheologian.com>.

INTRODUCTION

What is perseverance? We Christians like to use this word, but do we really know what it means? If we are talking about the Christian life (and we are), then we undergo a transformation in persevering to our goal. We begin the faith as babes in Christ, and we are steadfastly pressing forward to that great day when we will see his face and reign with him in the new heavens and the new earth. And when that day comes, we will not be as we are now. We will be holy. We will be changed. And so, as we persevere, we are being prepared for holiness. We are being made like Christ.

When we say, “I am a Christian,” what do we mean by this profession? This is a very important question. In fact, I would like to propose that our answer to this question, and our ability to proactively cling to a proper confession of what we believe, is directly connected to our perseverance in the Christian life. All Christians need to know what they are persevering for, whether it is through a fiery trial or the mundanity of everyday living. This entails a tenacity to grasp what is true about the person and work of Jesus Christ. I call it *theological fitness*.

I realized this as I was teaching a women’s Bible study on Hebrews. This sermon-letter¹ was written to exhort the intended first audience of Jewish believers to persevere in the Christian faith and not to turn back to their old covenant

1. For a good explanation of the genre of Hebrews as a sermon-letter, see Dennis E. Johnson, “The Epistle to the Hebrews as an Apostolic Preaching Paradigm,” chap. 6 in *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 167–97.

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sacrificial system and ceremonies. Of course, in his providence, it is also God's Word to us. Indeed, Hebrews gives us all a better understanding of the true Prophet, Priest, and King to which all others were only a type and shadow. It is a very theological sermon. Theology is merely the study of God, knowing God. After studying all the indicatives of who God is and what he has done in Christ, I was captivated with a particular imperative that the preacher to the Hebrews lays out in order to press the reader to perseverance: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23).

That's it. That's how you persevere. This exhortation is the center of three "let us" statements that the author is applying to the Hebrews after teaching how the person and work of Christ gives us direct access to God through a new and better covenant. And it really sums up the message of perseverance that is the theme of the whole sermon-letter.² Before this, the writer carefully gives us a detailed theology, thoroughly explaining the Christian confession of hope. And what imperative follows to encourage us in faithful perseverance throughout the sermon-letter? Hold on to it—not just cavalierly, but hold fast! Our exhortation is to hold fast to our confession. For the rest of the sermon, this exhortation is expounded. Are you tempted to backslide? Hold fast! Are you being persecuted? Hold fast! Through suffering, fear, and chastisement, and in the ordinary, everyday life of faith and obedience, we are encouraged to hold fast. It may sound like an easy adage, but my goal in this book is to show you that it is a workout. And this kind of workout, this exhortation, in fact, promotes a theological fitness.

Think about it. The author to the Hebrews is telling us to hold fast to a theological statement. What does that even mean? And what does it take? How does this help us to persevere?

2. "The author's plea is summed up in Hebrews 10:23" (Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006], 9).

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WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?

It means that we need to intimately “know what we believe and why we believe it.”³ In other words, it means that you need to be a good theologian. Unfortunately, many evangelicals today seem to have an aversion to theology. Studying God’s Word and learning about our Creator and Redeemer require exertion. After all, we aren’t striving just to learn *about* God, but to *know* him intimately. All relationships require effort. But how can we compare knowing the one and only God to any other relationship? It’s overwhelming. How are we even worthy to learn?

And yet our great God has spoken. He has condescended to communicate to us, revealing his character in a covenant treaty. The words that God has carefully preserved about his plan of redemption, his sovereign holiness, goodness, love, justice, amazing mercy, and grace, are taken for granted. The average American owns more than three copies of the Bible,⁴ many of which are collecting enough dust to write the word *damnation* across the cover, as Charles Spurgeon so eloquently put it.⁵ Think about it: the authoritative Word of God, collecting dust. To persevere, we need to know the confession of our hope, and we can’t do that with a dusty Bible.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO KNOW GOD?

It takes holding fast to the truth he reveals about himself in his Word. And that takes fitness. When we hear the word *fitness*, we most likely apply it to someone who is in good physical health. To be fit is to be competent, to have the skill needed for

3. This is the motto of White Horse Inn. See “About Us,” White Horse Inn, accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.whitehorseinn.org>.

4. Stoyan Zaimov, “Poll: Americans Own Many Bibles, But Rarely Read Them,” *The Christian Post*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/poll-americans-own-many-bibles-but-rarely-read-them-71823/>.

5. Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Bible,” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, vol. 1–2 (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 33.

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the task at hand. A lifestyle of fitness and good health is highly promoted in our culture for both the quality and length of life. But we know that, as hard as we work to be physically healthy, it is a fading reality. So if physical fitness is valuable even though our bodies are aging and wasting away, how much more valuable is a spiritual, theological fitness? “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

And yet many people have an aversion to fitness. We all want to have good health, right? So what’s the problem? The problem is that there is something always working against us in our fight to be healthy, whether it is in a physical pursuit of fitness or in a vigorous effort to know God. John Owen explains that this command in Hebrews to hold fast insinuates an opposing force, a “great danger” even. “To ‘hold fast’ implies the putting forth our utmost strength and endeavors in the defense of our profession, and a constant perseverance in so doing.”⁶ Holding fast to our confession of hope requires fight. One thing is for sure, we cannot hold fast to a confession of hope that we know little about. Faith is a gift of God, but faith is a fighting grace. *Theological fitness, then, refers to that persistent fight to exercise our faith by actively engaging in the gospel truth revealed in God’s Word.* It isn’t just a remembering of some Bible verses about God, but a trust in his promises that motivates us in holy living.

God’s Word cannot be ignored. We must wrestle with it. This takes a level of theological fitness and stamina. There are some great illustrations of physical fitness given in Scripture to explain this theological fitness, as I have named it. In Hebrews alone, the Christian is compared to a marathon racer and a combatant in the Grecian Olympics (Heb. 12:1–2, 12). We see in Philippians 1:27–29 an image of military combat training that the Grecian Olympics borrows from for competitive pur-

6. John Owen, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1968), 200.

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poses. Paul also talks about running a race to win the prize in 1 Cor. 9:24–27. These are all exhortations to a theological fitness in perseverance.

Neither Paul nor the writer to the Hebrews was writing to an audience full of athletes, and neither am I. But the illustrations are used anyway because they help us to understand that the Christian life also takes training, exercise, and fight to persevere. I don't care if you are physically fit as much as I care about your theological fitness. So I am writing to every Christian who would like to have a better understanding of perseverance by having a better understanding of who God is and what he has done.

HOW DOES THIS HELP US TO PERSEVERE?

I am suggesting that our perseverance in the Christian faith is connected to our theological health. And yet our Hebrews 10:23 verse gives us great news. We persevere not because of our own faithfulness, but because he who promised is faithful. Indeed, we see that Christ has already gone before us in the race and secured our victory. Only Jesus had the fitness for the work of our salvation. But he has now qualified us for the race of the Christian life. This is encouraging! How could we not want to learn all there is to know about our great Savior and Victor? And the more we learn about our God, the more our theological fitness level is strengthened.

Our theology shapes the way we live. What we believe about who God is, who we are, and what he has done will affect our everyday thinking and behavior. As we learn about our Creator and Redeemer, our desire is to be like Christ. And this is God's promise to his people. But do we really believe this as we are hitting our alarm clocks, wondering if there is any way we can afford just seven more minutes of sleep? Do we really believe that we are going to be like Christ when all is said and done? And how do we get to that point?

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WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

What I hope to do in this book is to further explain theological fitness and to encourage you in perseverance by unpacking all the rich elements in this great verse, Hebrews 10:23. I've broken down the verse into five parts, each with two chapters expanding upon the idea of that segment. There are questions at the end of each chapter that make this book easy to use for a small-group study. And yet I don't want to just rip Hebrews 10:23 out of its context to do a study on perseverance and theological fitness. I want to raise this verse up while recognizing all the rich strands of context that surround it in the sermon-letter to the Hebrews. So you will notice that while I certainly am going to be using other Scriptures for this workout—I mean study—I will also be borrowing much from this sermon-letter on perseverance.

We may be well aware of our physical fitness levels. Whether they are good, fair, or terrible, we certainly understand the need for health. But our fitness levels reveal our readiness in other areas as well. Are you aware of your mental fitness or emotional fitness levels? These are analogies that I will use as well to compare with my teaching on theological fitness.

How do we hold on to a confession? And what is our hope? Is this something that we do alone? What happens if we falter? These are questions that this book will answer. Our hope is real because our God is faithful. And yet every Christian struggles with this simple truth. I know how hard it is to begin a workout. Sometimes we just don't feel like doing what it takes for fitness. But like I said, faith is a fighting grace. I'm afraid that we tend to associate it with suffering and trial, or maybe even just getting by. And who wants to talk about that? Do you wake up each morning psyched to persevere through your day? Or do you wake up hoping to survive through it? I think we often think of perseverance as passive endurance.

I hope to change that.

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I propose that perseverance is an exciting exhortation for every Christian. My goal is for this book to serve you like your favorite song that gets you pumped up for your next event. Every Christian will persevere in the Christian life. But perseverance takes fight, and fighting is not passive.

You may be going through a hard time in your life right now. Maybe you are struggling in a difficult relationship, dealing with the death of a loved one, or trying not to let an illness get the best of you. Many of us are just trying to continue on in our ordinary lives. A better understanding of the doctrine of perseverance will motivate us to face it all with a sense of purpose and joy. I invite you to take up some theological fitness training with me as I unpack this one amazing verse along with the great metaphor that physical fitness lends to theology.

PART 1

“LET US”

TOUGHEST EVENT ON THE PLANET¹

Our key verse on theological fitness, Hebrews 10:23, opens with “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” Right away we see that this exhortation is to the covenant community of believers, not something that we do in isolation.

Have you heard of the Tough Mudder? It is a hardcore, ten-to twelve- mile challenge. British Special Forces designed the twenty-five military-style obstacles that make up the course. The task seems insurmountable, as the website boasts that it will “test your all around strength, stamina, mental grit, and camaraderie.”² Indeed it will. Seriously, watch the video footage on their website. Those are the images I had in my head while teaching a Bible study lesson on Hebrews 11:13–16:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking

1. The slogan for Tough Mudder. “Press Room,” Tough Mudder, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.toughmudder.com/press-room>.

2. Tough Mudder Perth (Team SXF), Facebook post, October 27, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/events/245926515552094/>.

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a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

My brother, Luke, assembled a team from his Mixed Martial Arts academy to compete when the Tough Mudder rolled into Frederick, Maryland. The first obstacle was called the *Arctic Enema*—pretty much a pool of ice water that you have to swim through. The *Boa Constrictor* course consists of cold, muddy pipes that you crawl up and downhill through, only to then progress to a sloppy, muddy barbwire course on the other end. Many of these obstacles are impossible without help. The *Everest* is a quarter-pipe wall coated in mud and grease. I don't even think the American Ninja Warriors can make it over this wall alone. And if I had to pass through the *Electroshock Therapy* (yes, you get shocked!) alone I would be rocking back and forth in the corner crying.

You might be thinking, “This is totally what those Mixed Martial Arts kind of people would feel they have to do to prove their toughness.” Maybe, but there is much more to it than that. Here is a part of their philosophy on the website: “But Tough Mudder is more than an event, it's a way of thinking. By running a Tough Mudder challenge, you'll unlock a true sense of accomplishment, have a great time, and discover a camaraderie with your fellow participants that's experienced all too rarely these days.”³ This is exactly what I heard from all the participants. There's something about focusing on a goal together, overcoming every obstacle on the way.

Tough Mudder isn't about finishing first, either. The team stays with their weakest link, helping one another to finish all together. The event has raised over six million dollars for the

3. Ibid.

TOUGHEST EVENT ON THE PLANET

Wounded Warrior Project. You see wounded warriors competing alongside, prosthetic legs and all. Pretty cool.

The above Scripture from Hebrews highlights the fact that God's people are also focusing on a common goal that changes our perspective. Particularly when discussing what it means to be a pilgrim with my Bible study group, I thought of this obstacle course. Pilgrims have a destination, and they must lay aside any distraction that hinders them from reaching their goal. There are many obstructions on our heavenward journey. If our focus is on the barriers, we may want to turn back. But believers don't even have that option. Like the Tough Mudders, we have a completely different way of thinking. Our minds must be focused on the eternal promises in Christ. First we see them, then we are assured of them, and so we embrace them, confessing our identity in Christ.⁴

UNITY IN STRIVING FOR THE PROMISE

Paul gives a similar analogy to my Tough Mudder illustration in his letter to the Philippians. Appealing to the status of Roman citizenship that is valuable to the Philippians, as well as to the high population of soldiers inhabiting Philippi as a military town, Paul uses language that will invoke a passionate response.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ

4. See Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 719.

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you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.
(Phil. 1:27–29)

Dennis Johnson shone some light on this passage in his commentary on Philippians. “Behind our English version’s ‘let your manner of life be’ (ESV) is a single Greek verb that has *citizen* at its core. The Greek word for *city* is *polis*, from which we get the word *politics*.”⁵ He explains how Paul normally refers to the Christian walk in an exhortation such as this, but we see him use a word here that appeals to behaving worthily of the citizenship to which you have been granted. Philippians esteemed their status as a colony of Rome because it came with great privileges. Those with Roman citizenship were guaranteed due process in a Roman court trial and considerable exclusion from certain taxes.⁶ Johnson also points out that in an area full of retired soldiers and active-duty troops, the language Paul uses such as “*standing firm* in one spirit, with one mind *striving side by side* . . . and not frightened in anything by your opponents” would stir up “vivid combat memories,” the readers knowing that “steadfast courage and unity were crucial to victory.”⁷

As Paul is drawing on the Philippian pride of citizenship and the connection that has to service as a soldier, he is invoking an image of what it is like to be a citizen of Christ’s heavenly kingdom. First, he emphasizes the necessity of God’s Spirit as the “divine Guardian of our unity of soul and mind.”⁸ With this in mind, Paul then gives a great illustration of theological fitness in the phrase “strive side by side.” Johnson provides the background of the derivation of this phrase.

“Striv[e] side by side” is derived from a root that sometimes refers to athletic competition. (The birthplace of the original

5. Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 88–89.

6. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

7. *Ibid.*, 89.

8. *Ibid.*, 92.

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Olympics lay some distance south of Philippi in Achaia.) Yet ancient Greek athletics developed out of military training for combat, as we still see today in sports such as the javelin, the hammer, the discus, and wrestling. Here, Paul is thinking in terms of mortal combat. He paints the picture of an advancing line of Roman legionnaires, their long shields forming both a seamless wall before them and a “roof” over their heads against the enemy’s arrows and spears.⁹

What an amazing picture of Christ’s church! There is no looking out for oneself. There is no running ahead or leaving anyone behind. It is active recognition of interdependence upon one another in perseverance. This kind of unity requires humility and confidence in the Lord. Paul is admonishing a church that has been wrapped up in selfish bickering in reaction to persecution and false teaching. He is reminding them of their status in a much more marvelous citizenship. This is a call to behave according to who they are. There is an enemy, and Jesus Christ is exactly whom both the Philippians and we can draw upon for soldiering ahead. As we recognize our status as Christ’s church, there is no room for independent perseverance.

But citizen-soldiers who serve heaven’s King, Jesus, will not compete as rivals or withdraw in introspective self-pity, each licking his or her own wounds and ignoring others’ pain. Rather, their costly compassion for others, their humble honoring of others, will reflect the humility and compassion of the Lord and Savior who reigns in their true city. *Selfless solidarity!*¹⁰

Christian perseverance isn’t a self-seeking fight. We strive together and honor one another, even when it is uncomfortable and difficult—especially when it is uncomfortable and difficult. We invest in one another because of the one who invested in

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 92–93.

“LET US”

us. And we hold fast to our hope in the covenant community of the church. Part of knowing God (theology) is knowing his bride, the church.

It's funny. People dress up for these Tough Mudder events. The teams who enter to compete together usually pick a theme to identify themselves and promote unity. My brother's crew decided to all dress like superheroes. I'm sure this is much different from the Philippian soldiers' uniforms. As ordinary, modern-day Christians, we may not be in funny costumes, but there should still be a sense in which we seem like strangers to the watching world. Our royal status in Christ's kingdom may not be worn ostensibly, but as we progress in our journey we are being transformed and prepared for eternal glory. How amazing is that?

ORDINARY (MEANS) VS. EXTRAORDINARY (GRACE)

God didn't send us out alone as strangers and pilgrims on this earth. He has the entire church as the body of Christ, sisters and brothers in the Lord, who accompany us. He even set aside the first day of every week for worship together, a glimpse of what is to come. And so the preacher to the Hebrews labors to explain why they can now draw near to God in worship. His first "let us" imperative is "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). Immediately following our exhortation to hold fast the confession of our hope, the writer of Hebrews sandwiches it with another imperative for the church:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (10:24–25)

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As we wait for the approaching day of our Lord's return, believers are given something quite extraordinary. On the first day of every week, we are called to gather together for corporate worship. This worship service seems pretty ordinary. We live in an entertainment-driven culture that is saturated in the latest technology. With the many vying messages fireworking on our phones, computer screens, televisions, and other devices, our attention spans have actually shrunk. We expect crisp, visual interfaces and easily scanned information. As Nicholas Carr so aptly put it, "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."¹¹ The thought of singing along with a mediocre ensemble of instruments and voices, and then listening to a twenty-minute or longer sermon, may sound unappealing to a culture accustomed to such extraordinary means of communication. And with the five-star-restaurant-worthy recipes that I can pull up on Pinterest, broken bread and a sip of wine may not seem worth my time.

God has ordained very ordinary means to communicate extraordinary grace while the world uses extraordinary means to communicate ordinary, humdrum data. A study done by Retrevo interviewing one thousand people indicates that 48 percent of us check Facebook before getting out of bed.¹² So eager to get the latest update, many don't seem to mind being interrupted during a meal, in the bathroom, or even during an intimate moment. Facebook and Twitter seem to be a preferred means to take in the daily news, according to this study. And what is the worthy information that we are running to our gadgets for? One quick glance of my Facebook newsfeed is showing me a picture of a friend's coffee drink, some people complaining about the weather, a handful of worthy articles to share (and

11. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 7.

12. See Sharon Gaudin, "Social Networking Addicts Updating from Bed, Bathroom," *Computerworld*, March 7, 2010, http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9172378/Social_networking_addicts Updating_from_bed_bathroom.

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funny ones too), an announcement that a friend’s son received his driving license, as well as numerous selfies and advertisements. Pretty ordinary.

And yet the actual percentage of people who will get out of bed for a worship service as regular attendees may be less than 20 percent.¹³ Do the means of grace that God has instituted seem too ordinary to get out of bed for? Are we welcoming interruptions by our social networks while turning a blind eye to the weekly interruption of the age to come into this age—an age that is wasting away? That is in a sense what is happening when we gather for corporate worship—the future is interrupting the present.

While our spectacular, shiny devices mediate our friends’ latest status updates to us, Jesus Christ and all his benefits are conferred to us through the preached Word and the sacraments. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the Mediator of a better covenant that is established by better promises (8:6). We have direct access to God through Christ’s priestly service. Not only that, but in him we make up the living temple of God, “mediating God’s presence to the world.”¹⁴ The church is a living picture of extraordinary grace. We are a body full of helpless sinners, who have been rescued and redeemed and now embody the Spirit of our Savior himself! Yes, we are individually given the Holy Spirit as a sign and a seal of our new creation in Christ, but together as his church we are his beloved bride that he will come for on that approaching day.

As our weeks bombard us with updates through the means of our extraordinary devices, we may begin to think that we are receiving extraordinary information. But when we are

13. See Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” CHURCHLEADERS, accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html/5>.

14. G. K. Beale, “The Temple and the Church’s Mission” (lecture, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA, March 30, 2007), available online at <http://links.christreformed.org/realaudio/20070330a.mp3>.

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called together as a people to a set-apart space, we hear truly amazing news. We need to hear the gospel preached because this good news is completely outside of ourselves. And not only is the message powerful, but the Word itself is living and active, revealing our hearts (see Heb. 4:12). I may be able to present my best to you on all my social profiles, but before God I am completely exposed. The law of his Word undresses my faux self-importance and self-righteousness, and then the gospel graciously clothes me in the righteousness of Christ. I find that all the little stories I think are significant throughout the week are put in perspective as I'm recast into the divine drama revealed in Scripture.¹⁵ Michael Horton articulates it so well: "Created by speech, upheld by speech, and one day glorified by speech, we are, like the rest of creation, summoned beings, not autonomous. We exist because we have been spoken into existence, and we persist in time because the Spirit ensures that the Father's speaking, in the Son, will not return void."¹⁶

HELP TO HOLD ON

Our verse could have just begun with "Hold fast the confession of your hope," but it doesn't. It begins, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope." When you think of holding fast to something, it doesn't really sound like a group activity, does it? But there is something about Christ's body, the church, that makes all the difference. Jesus gave us the church as a gift that glorifies him and produces Christlikeness in us. We can be confident that theological fitness, that persistent fight to exercise our faith by actively engaging in the gospel truth revealed in God's Word, is not something we participate in alone. The church

15. "Holy time (Sabbath) and holy space (temple) provide the coordinates for the covenant people" (Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 262).

16. *Ibid.*, 61.

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helps us to hold on through encouragement and exhortation. In that way, we hold on together.

We see in our verses above that encouragement is a major role as our calling in the body of Christ. I thought about that verse when I picked my eldest daughter up from volleyball conditioning last year. Solanna had just begun conditioning for her second season as a high school volleyball player. But at almost fourteen years old, she was barely five feet tall. It can be challenging when she is playing sports up against her full-grown friends. Solee did make the high school volleyball team as an eighth grader and had a great season. During the off-season, I tried to encourage her to work out with me to keep her fitness level up. And with a little prodding she would fit in a workout here and there.

Once conditioning started up again for her as a freshman, I wasn't sure how she was going to do with the hour and a half of fitness. Being smaller, Solee had to work a bit harder to do some of these workouts. When I picked her up from her first day back to conditioning, Solanna said she had held her own pretty well with the upperclassmen. They were surprised that she could do the box jumps that many of them could not. “How does that little girl get up there?” But the second evening when I picked her up, Solee was smiling from ear to ear with some news. “Mom, we had to do the six inches today [this is where you lay on your back and raise your feet six inches for as long as you can—a killer on the abs!], and I lasted the longest, even beating the varsity girls!” It turns out that my girl held on for five minutes with her feet raised. Five minutes! I challenge you to try it for thirty seconds.

I was super impressed at Solanna's drive to hang in there. It was so rewarding to see her proud, accomplished smile as I shouted, “Perseverance!” with my victory arm raised in the air. I keep telling the kids that perseverance takes fight, and fighters need to train. This small victory was affirming of this very truth.

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But it wasn't just training during the off-season that helped Solanna to persevere. Solee said her legs were shaking like crazy and she really wanted to give up. However, she had a friend there who had already gone down, and she was encouraging Solanna to hold on. When it was down to three girls, Solee's friend was telling her whose legs were shaking and was cheering, "You've got this!" She kept encouraging her not to quit.

Solanna had something that helped her to hold on, similar to what Christ gives us. She had an encourager. This is just what the writer to the Hebrews was emphasizing in our verses above. Following our call to hold fast, we are told to encourage and exhort the body of believers. Solee's friend did both in a mere fitness challenge, and it made all the difference. She encouraged her with "You got this," and she exhorted her, "Don't give up!"

Christ gives us a whole body of encouragers with whom we run the race of the Christian life together. What a blessing! But we have much more to equip us in perseverance than my daughter did in her fitness challenge. Christians are exhorted to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering because he who promised is faithful. Solee didn't have a confession of hope; she had to depend on her own abilities while she was going through the pain. But Christians can hold on through adversity because we have the fitness of Jesus Christ who went before us. And not only do we get his Holy Spirit as a helper, but we are part of a body of worshipers. Why would we neglect this wonderful gift?

Solee's small triumph was a reminder to me to be an encourager in the Lord. All of us need encouragement. A girl on her team last year said to me, "Solee may be the smallest girl on the team, but I think she's the strongest." Sometimes we forget to encourage those who we know to be strong because, well, they are strong. We don't think they need it. That couldn't be further from the truth! The strong often need all the more encouragement because they usually carry a heavier load. My little girl

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has big strength, but it was her encouraging friend who helped her to persevere to the end.

AND AGAIN

Do you ever get a bit turned off when authors begin repeating themselves in a book? Perhaps you have felt this way in reading this book. If that is the case, I thank you for persevering this far. The thing is, we need things repeated to really learn. We actually have to *overlearn*, so that we can remember and then possibly teach others. This exhortation to the church is so important that the preacher to the Hebrews finds it worth repeating several times in this one sermon. In the midst of a warning against falling away from God, we see this accompanying call again:

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (3:13–14)

Again, we see this connection between theological fitness—that is, holding firm to our confession—and the love and unity for each other in the church. Notice that this isn’t merely a Sunday-morning duty. We are called to exhort one another every day! I am feeling convicted right now as I’m writing these words. That is a lot! It sets off a list in my head of people I should call, send cards to, or invite over for a visit. Heck, I can even exhort through text message if I’m short on time. What excuse do we really have? Especially when we know of its importance. Think about Solee. If her friend had said only once or twice in the beginning, “You can do this, hang in there,” Solee probably would have given up in weariness earlier. But her friend continued to cheer her on, to the point where her words were helping to keep Solanna’s little legs up. If Solee needed constant

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exhortation to hold on in a piddly volleyball practice, what kind of encouragement do you think we need to persevere through the deceitfulness of sin?

Christians should not be Sunday cheerleaders only. Why? Because we share in Christ, the one who held on through torture and ridicule. In our earlier Philippians verse, Paul said that it has been granted to us not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for his sake (1:29). We may affirm that faith is a gift of grace, but suffering too? Later I will touch on how Hebrews 11 is full of those whose confession of hope resulted in life from death. They all suffered to the glory of God. And the beginning verses in Hebrews 12 bring us to the climax, Jesus Christ, who has received the promises as the author and finisher of our faith. The NKJV translates the beginning of Heb. 3:14, "For we have become partakers of Christ." Those in Christ share in all his benefits, so we can be confident that we will receive the promise. But it is also a gift of his grace that we share in his suffering. As he preserves us along the way, sanctifying us to his likeness, he gives us fellowship with one another to help us hold fast.

AND YET AGAIN

As Hebrews 12:1–2 compares the Christian life of perseverance to a race, Hebrews 12:12 gives a picture of the weariness and despair that we all encounter through different obstacles in the run. In chapter 4, I will elaborate on the command this verse gives to lift up our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees. But for now, notice how again in the verses immediately following we see this theological fitness illustration connected to an exhortation to the body of Christ.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that

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no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. (12:14–16)

If you're like me, you might be thinking that it is awfully hard to reach peace when we're told to get this involved in everyone's personal business. But in order to really strive for peace, we need to be honestly examining both our fellow believers and ourselves. This is hard, because our motives have to be pure. First of all, since sin is so deceitful, as are our own hearts (Jer. 17:9), it can be extremely difficult to have an honest evaluation of our own condition. As we strive to do this in light of God's revealed Word and with the aid of his Spirit, we also need to depend on one another in love. And as we lovingly confront a fellow believer, it should be with a motive to restoration so that he or she, too, will obtain the grace of God. The preacher is calling the church to the hard task of redemptive engagement for the purity of the church and the glory of God.

While we aren't getting into particular sins here, you can see it isn't pretty. It is horrifying to see in ourselves, and it is very uncomfortable to approach those we care about who are falling away. Too often, we reason with ourselves that confrontation is more trouble than it's worth. And church discipline? Does anyone do that anymore? The answer is yes, if we care about the glory of God, the purity of the church, and the restoration of that person to the Lord. Perhaps it would be easier to be more open with one another if we were more concerned with what God promises than with what other people think.

The fact is that life is ugly sometimes. We get ourselves dirty when we shouldn't, and yet we need to get our hands dirty as we take on one another's burdens. We are exhorted to lift up our own drooping hands as well as to pick one another up. That is exactly what my brother's Tough Mudder team had to do to make it to the end.

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But we know there are much harder obstacles in the Christian “race” than greasy quarter-pipes and electric shocks. Part of the grace and strength God gives us on our pilgrimage is the amazing camaraderie of our fellow pilgrims. As I watched the video clips of Luke’s “Team Clinch” going through the Electroshock Therapy, I noticed that they formed a chain, everyone’s hands resting on the shoulders of the person in front. It was a powerful image. To make it up the quarter-pipe wall, they formed another sort of chain, standing on one another’s shoulders all the way to the top. At the crest were the strongest participants, encouraging as they pulled the next one over. Faith in action.

And they finished strong. They finished cold, muddy, bruised, tired, and glorious. They were awarded with the official Tough Mudder badge. I couldn’t help but agree with the website’s philosophy. The participants accomplished more than a physical feat; rather, they were a part of something that is experienced all too rarely these days. Has this been the Christian experience for you?

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

1. My previous church was actually named Pilgrim Presbyterian, which is a great reminder of my pilgrim status. What exactly is a pilgrim? How does this status make us different from the rest of the world?
2. In Philippians 1:27 Paul tells us to stand firm in one spirit, with one mind. How does this exhortation play out when we are in disagreement over doctrine or practice? How important is theology to our Christian union?
3. The imagery of an advancing line of legionnaires against the enemy is both bold and intimate. Do you have relationships in your church that foster the vulnerability, trust, and soldiering that this illustration represents? When you are with your Christian brothers and sisters, do you have this

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kind of selfless solidarity, or are you more concerned with how you've been offended by something or someone who's not measuring up?

4. Have you made a fighting effort to get to know Christ's bride?
5. How does the worship service affect your ideas about what is ordinary and what is extraordinary? Is ordinary bad? Why do you think God has ordained such ordinary means to convey such extraordinary grace?
6. Do you find that your involvement in technology has made it harder for you to pay attention? What are you sacrificing for the constant interruptions from media devices throughout the week? How does this compare to your willingness to be interrupted by the gospel?
7. Is regular church attendance important to you? How about membership?
8. When was the last time you were encouraged to persevere? What difference did it make?

THIS BOOK IS FOR ALL CHRISTIANS WHO WANT TO HOLD FAST TO THEIR FAITH WITHOUT WAVERING, EVEN DURING THE SUFFERING AND IRRITATIONS OF ORDINARY LIFE.

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