

**Finding Fortitude: Searching in the Unlikeliest of Places**

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“Seven Coptic Christians killed by Isil in Egypt bus attack” (France-Presse, 2018).

Another deadly attack on my people, and another deadly attack on my courage. Headlines like these have become the norm; for years, terrorists have gunning down innocent Christians in Egypt. As the news slowly travels to the West, others foreign to the situation often confront me with the question: “What prompted this attack?” How do I explain to others that my people have been terrorized and brutally murdered for centuries, all because of their belief in Jesus? How do I process that this is not a page in the history books, but a modern-day story being told over and over again with freshly spilled Christian blood as ink? Perhaps the greatest question of all, is how do I maintain the delicate virtue of fortitude as these assailants try to tear down the walls of my faith, heartlessly taking the lives of innocents?

I was privileged to grow up in America, far from the poverty and discrimination my parents endured in Egypt. Opportunity was at my fingertips in every sense; I was free to pursue my education, I was free to practice my religion, I was free to have an untroubled childhood, entitled with innocence. These were all things I took for granted for the greater majority of my life, not understanding that these conditions were a privilege, not a guarantee. Even the mere act of walking into my church on a Sunday morning to pray was something I never thought twice about; at times I was even selfish enough to grant myself an extra hour or two of sleep, missing the Sunday service. Little did I know that just a continent or two over, my family members in Egypt were literally risking their lives each and every week, just for an opportunity to meet with their Creator. Every time they entered through the church doors, they entered proudly despite the possibility that the next doors they would enter could be those of Heaven. Week after week, church bombing after the next, more innocent Christian lives were taken. Yet, my family persisted even more on going to church, refusing to allow these blatant acts of terrorism touch

their faith. They were the physical embodiment of fortitude, a word that I was not yet worthy of claiming.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (BibleGateway, Matthew 5:10). These words became a mantra, a promise that the pain and mourning we felt on this earth would manifest itself as a reward in heaven. However, over the years, each and every celebration from Christmas to Easter became plagued by the endless attacks that milked every ounce of joy from these festive days. As the gruesome pictures of blood-splattered children surfaced again and again, I lacked the words necessary to articulate the pain I felt in my chest, the ache that reverberated throughout my body. As the pain morphed into an ugly, consuming anger, Mark Twain’s words resonated in my mind: “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured” (Schmidt). I knew that harboring this anger would not diminish the pain or strengthen my faith, so I decided to let it dissolve in my tears, determined not to allow the terrorists to win.

I am by no means an impulsive person; my actions are calculated, and my plans are made months in advance. So, when I booked a mission trip to Egypt to serve in the underprivileged, persecuted Christian communities, I was just as surprised as everyone around me. My parents, terrified for my safety and conscious of the brutal reality that awaited me, did everything in their power to deter me from this trip. I could not sufficiently explain to them the sense of duty and obligation I felt. How could I explain that I wanted to venture into my homeland, which was very much foreign to me, in order to serve in communities brimming with danger? It just did not make sense from a logical perspective, but this mission superseded logic. I could no longer watch from the sidelines, sympathizing from the safety of afar, while knowing that there was something I

could contribute. On June 30th, 2018 I took a twelve-hour flight to the country that did not welcome me.

“It is courage, courage, courage, that raises the blood of life to crimson splendor. Live bravely and present a brave front to adversity” (Horace). As I spent that month in Egypt learning and serving in many different communities, these words became persistently relevant. Playing with and talking to orphaned children in the outskirts of these poor areas brought me an immeasurable joy, something I had never experienced despite all the luxuries of home. The simplicity in their happiness and their resilience in the face of every single obstacle thrown in their path was something I could not fathom, but I tried very much to capture in my heart. I will not lie, for the greater majority of my trip I was terrified; every loud noise startled me, as I could not shake the possibility of becoming another statistic. I had left the safety and comfort of everything I had known and climbed into the hungry lion’s den. However, I did not go alone. “Daniel answered, “May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me” (BibleGateway, Daniel 6:21-22). I traveled with the protection of my God and the strength of my people, knowing that my display of courage was only made possible by the inconceivable fortitude of those who came before me.

Can I say that this experience has made me fearless? No. Can I say that I profoundly changed the lives of those I served? Probably not. One thing I can say is that I claimed responsibility for my fear, pushing myself to fight back. In every fear and in every pain, I remembered the word fortitude, and challenged myself to continue. Caesar so accurately captured the words I could not articulate: “No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected” (Caesar). As I continue with my otherwise ordinary life as a college student, I still worry and stress like any other student would. I am preoccupied with exams and

assignments, trying to find the balance between my happiness and success. However, I hold these experiences in my heart and try to express this learned fortitude in everything I do. I remember that I am capable of enduring any pain or adversity because “fortitude is the marshal of thought, the armor of the will, and the fort of reason” (Bacon).

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