



# IN DESPERATE NEED OF COURAGE

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In April of 2008, President Bush awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to a Navy SEAL by the name of Michael Monsoor; Monsoor had been killed in Iraq in September of 2006. Beneath his shirt, George Bush wore a gold replica of Monsoor's dog tags and as he brought Monsoor's parents to stand beside him, Bush could hardly hold himself together as he struggled against tears to get out these words:

"The story of his sacrifice humbles and inspires all who hear it. While their missions were often carried out in secrecy, their love of country and devotion to each other was always clear. On June 28, 2005, Michael would give his life for these ideals."

In May of the same year Monsoor had been the hero of another rescue—one he survived—saving the life of a teammate while risking his own. President Bush gave this description of the event: "With bullets flying all around them, Mike returned fire with one hand, while helping pull the injured man to safety with the other. In a dream about the incident months later, the wounded SEAL envisioned Mike coming to the rescue with wings on his shoulders."

But in September of 2006, Michael Monsoor gave up the last of his spare lives, saving two fellow soldiers by throwing himself on a live grenade. As bush describes:

"Mike and two teammates had taken position on the outcropping of a rooftop when an insurgent grenade bounced off Mike's chest and landed on the roof. Mike had a clear chance to escape, but he realized that the other two SEALs did not. In that terrible moment, he had two options—to save himself, or to save his friends. For Mike, this was no choice at all. He threw himself onto the grenade, and absorbed the blast with his body," President Bush said. "One of the survivors put it this way: 'Mikey looked death in the face that day and said, You cannot take my brothers. I will go in their stead.'"

War is a trillion, trillion acts of courage and cowardice. That's on the battlefield. What about a surviving spouse? You couldn't say that moment of "looking death in the face" takes more courage than having to see it everyday on the face of a son or daughter, could you?

On this day, courage—dressed in the uniform of Michael Monsoor—was being honored by the nation, but courage has not always enjoyed this kind of approval ratings. For the decades prior to 9/11, America's stock in the moral commodity had been on a steady decline and in no place was this more visible than the sod battlefields of Hollywood where War movie after War movie shelled it out of national consciousness.

Catch 22 probably started it all—the military version of Catcher in the Rye, but that honor might need to be shared with All's Quiet on the Western Front. Then there was MASH, then Apocalypse Now, Dear Hunter and this was all before Director, Oliver Stone started shooting at the flag. After that, Hollywood spit them out with semi-automatic regularity: Full Metal Jacket, Born on the Fourth of July—reload—Hamburger Hill,



The Thin Red Line, Tigerland—reload. While these movies would occasionally give a salute to something noble, by-and-large they gave us an alternative narrative and definition of bravery that sought to explain this reflection of God’s image in strictly survivalist terms.

Think, for example of the 1990’s Oscar winning *Dances With Wolves*. The setting is the Civil War and the protagonist, Lt. John Dunbar played by Kevin Costner, has a badly wounded leg. Rather than endure the horrors of amputation, Dunbar opts for suicide. He peels out in front of his troops, crosses the double yellow line of sanity and drives his horse into oncoming bullets. As fate would have it, his suicide gallop rallies the troops to victory and Dunbar becomes a war hero, defining courage as a “somewhat suicidal impulse gone wonderfully wrong.”

Sometimes the message was more subtle. On the surface, *Braveheart* seemed to be a revival of the Greek Epic but it wasn’t the exposition on courage people mistook it for; in fact it was a deconstruction of it. Think about the storyline, for it must provide the viewer a plausible explanation for the radical impulses of William Wallace. And what is the engine that provides explanatory power for Wallace’s courage? It could be summarized in the old saying, “The most dangerous enemy is the man who has nothing left to lose.” Having lost his wife to a violent execution by the British, the movie postulates that Wallace was fortified by a passion for revenge and absolutely nothing left to loose. This is not a very robust definition of courage: “Courage, it’s what’s left, when there’s nothing left to live for.” I don’t see that replacing “Be all that you can be” as a recruiting slogan for the military.

Before 9/11, the conceptual framework of courage in this country was in decay, badly weakened and teetering like a 140-story building on the tip of Manhattan. But as the Twin Towers crumbled, selfless servants rushed in risking everything, and in so doing transformed the ash and rubble of Ground Zero into a towering monument to modern courage. 9/11 changed the national perception, definition and value of this virtue. How could it not; we saw with our own eyes people who had everything to lose give their lives for those they’d never even met. We no longer had to mumble the words after “the Land of the Free . . .” Courage had resumed its place on the skyline of American consciousness.

## THE FORGOTTEN HERO

I’ve taken this historical backtrail because I believe courage has likewise vanished from Christian consciousness, though for altogether different reasons. We are, after all, free from persecution so we can afford to keep courage boxed in the attic like an old Tux: should times and trends change, we’re optimistic it will still fit or we’ll be raptured out of it, the crumpled suit left behind. But I think the predominant source of our neglect is that we don’t have a file folder for courage. It doesn’t seem to fit in the category of spiritual disciplines like Bible study, prayer, or Daily Devotions and it never made it on our top-ten list of Christian virtues, being snubbed as a nominee for a ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (love joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness and self control). It just sort of fell between the seat cushions—out of sight, out of mind. But Scripture puts an extremely high value on courage, and there’s nothing that Scripture highly values that we can afford to lose. Yet we have lost it—worse—we probably haven’t even noticed it’s gone missing.

For example, if I came to you and said that I was struggling in my efforts to be an effective witness at my place of work. What would you say? You work with Campus Crusade for Christ, why would you be trying to witness to other missionaries? Right, but let’s say I didn’t: let’s say I worked for the ACME box company. What would you ask me as you sought to diagnose the problem and locate the source of my evangelistic impotence: Are you having devotions every morning? Have you been praying for the people at work? Have you tried memorizing evangelistic passages of Scripture? Do you know how to explain the gospel message? In what ways could you set a more godly example? All good questions. I’m sure these are things that I would ask. I doubt however, that you’d have the audacity or perhaps rudeness to ask if I were being a coward—”sounds to me, Rick, like you’re just plain yellow.”

And yet if I don’t witness in any reasonable sense of the word, if people don’t even know I’m a Christian, it’s more than likely that it’s because fear has shut me up: fear of losing my job, of what others think of me, of not getting promoted, of being judged or losing friends. What I lack is the courage to face and overcome these fears in order to be a witness for Christ. I do not doubt that any and all of the spiritual “to-do’s” I mentioned—Scripture memory and the like— affect our boldness, but they are not synonymous with courage. A robust worship life feeds and inclines to boldness, but courage



is its own action, it's own virtue, and must either be exercised . . . or not.

Or think of Christians you know with some very obvious sin issue. They appear oblivious to the presence of the moral disorder yet to those close to them it's as concealed as Tourette's. Is the problem that the Holy Spirit hasn't tried to speak to them about this issue or is the problem that they don't have the courage to hear painful truth about themselves from either the Holy Spirit or someone else?

So, when I say that courage has disappeared from our consciousness, I mean that when problems arise and the engine lights come on in our spiritual lives we look only to the traditional gauges of community, Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, unconfessed sin, etc. We don't have a mental warning light that says, "Coward. Running low on courage." And if our problem were cowardice would we have the courage to admit it? "Yes sir, I'm a coward alright. Can't run away from danger fast enough."

Because it has been so removed from our thinking, we are going to need to bake a theology of courage from scratch. But let's begin at the beginning, with a description of courage, so we know what it is we're running from.

## THE DEFINITION OF COURAGE

As the thesis of this book is not "courage" but "death," it's critical to see the connection between the two. Nothing could be more tightly braided than courage and death, both conceptually and practically. Whether it's risking one's life in the face of mortal danger, actually laying your life down, or some act of dying to self that involves an emotional, mental, social or relational death: whatever form death may take, courage is the moral fortitude to face it without surrender or retreat.

But like a complex molecule courage is equally bonded to life. Within courage, the willingness to die is due to a powerful attraction to life: to preserve one's own life, the life of another, the life of a nation, belief or ideal. Courage acts when it believes that greater life is to be gained through a direct encounter with death. In the case of Michael Monsoor, calculations were done in an instant but they were done: his was a calculated act of life, not suicide and not death. He muffled the grenade with his body so that his friends could live.

In his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton describes his rather meandering, or perhaps loafing, route to faith. Though Chesterton described it as "slovenly autobiography," it's a rather unique intellectual journey, and for Chesterton the virtue of courage was a signpost leading to God and away from atheism because it seemed to defy any kind of Survival of the Fittest explanation as in the case of 9/11 where firemen willingly traded in their lives for strangers unfit to save themselves. For Chesterton, true paradoxes were clearly the fingerprint of a Creator: Jesus, the God-man, chief among them. In his well-known description of courage, Chesterton, beautifully articulates the paradox of courage: embracing death out of a love for life:

"Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die. 'He that will lose his life, the same shall save it,' is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. It might be printed in an Alpine guide or a drill book. This paradox is the whole principle of courage; even quite earthly or quite brutal courage. A man cut off by the sea may save his life if he will risk it on the precipice. He can only get away from death by continually stepping within an inch of it. A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine..."

Courage is a passion for life manifested in a willingness to die; a desire for life that's so strong one is willing to walk within an inch of death to get it, desiring "life like water" yet "drinking death like wine" (but I'm sure he meant grapejuice).

So, returning to my previous two examples, courage to witness in the workplace would be driven by a strong desire for the spiritual life of others, so strong in fact that you'd be willing to suffer the death of your ego, status, job or relationships, in order to get it. Or in the case of the person oblivious to their besetting sin, courage would manifest itself in a desire for greater spiritual life (godliness and intimacy with God); the desire for life would be strong enough to drive them from the safe cover of mediocrity and denial, out into the open where truth could actually graze them.



Virtue is defined as behavior deemed to be good or of a high moral standard. It would seem like “Being on-time” or “Putting the toothpaste cap back on” could squeeze into such a broad definition, and of course different cultures and traditions have some not-so-insignificant variations. The Greeks saw Justice, Courage, Wisdom and Moderation as the cardinal virtues. Hindus throw cleanliness into their list and in the 21st century being “Green” is perhaps most highly venerated. Therefore, which virtues are important, and what value to place on them must always be informed by Scripture. But as you can find biblical support for a good many virtues including being green and cleanly, what requires reflection is the relative value and importance conferred by God’s Word, not simply its inference or mention. So, of course, courage is in the Bible, but just how important is it? I think the answer is “very.”

## THE CANNON OF COURAGE

### JOSHUA

In the opening minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* you can literally smell the fear—a mixture of vomit, seawater, sweat and other bodily fluids—sloshing around the floor of the landing-craft as it nears the beach at Normandy just moments before the invasion of Nazi occupied Europe. This is essentially where we find ourselves in the opening chapter of the book of Joshua, as we wait with Joshua and Israel in the hand-wringing days prior to the invasion and occupation of the Promised Land. It is one of the most critical events in all of redemptive history.

I’m no military expert but it seems to me that from a tactical perspective there’s got to be a hundred and eight ways this mission could go sideways spiritually as well as militarily. But Israel’s Commander and Chief seems preoccupied with only one: the potential for cowardice in his General.

Issued no less than four times in the first chapter is this refrain: “be strong and courageous” (v. 1:6), “be strong and very courageous” (v. 1:7), “be strong and courageous” (v. 1:9), “Only be strong and courageous” (v. 1:18). Now whatever else we may know about God, we know this: He knows the future and he only speaks when entirely necessary. God’s omniscience means he has war-gamed every scenario, and so what else are we to conclude from this repetitive charge but this: as God looks out on the impending battle, there is only one way he foresees that the plan could be in jeopardy, and

that is if Joshua is a coward.

Here, at the most crucial moment, in the most crucial battle, in the campaign of redemption the panoramic view of Scripture narrows to a squint at one person and one virtue. It’s as if God is saying to Joshua, “everything is going according to plan, and the only way this won’t succeed is if you don’t have the courage to pull the trigger.” Now I’m sure God would have found a way, I’m not endeavoring here to reconcile the sovereignty of God and the sissyness of man. I’m just seeking to make a point, and I think I’ve made it: there are times in Scripture, times in salvation history, when courage is unequivocally what counts.

### ESTHER

Next we turn to Esther: supermodel, secret agent, Laura Croft of the Old Testament.

The setting of the book of Esther is during Israel’s Babylonian captivity. The Persian king, Ahasuerus (also called Xerxes), having recently banished his wife Vashti, is in the market for a new queen. In what sounds like a reality TV show, Ahasuerus holds a beauty contest in order to find himself a reigning partner, and Esther emerges the winner. Unbeknownst to the king, Esther is a Jew, sovereignly placed in the palace by God to thwart a plot to annihilate the Jews. As the story unfolds, time is of the essence and Esther’s devout uncle Mordecai urges her to go to the King and intercede for her people. But the practice of inserting oneself into the king’s itinerary without being scheduled was a social faux pas punishable by death. This is going to take an enormous display of courage on Esther’s part and to strengthen her resolve Mordecai gives this infamous enjoinder.

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Mordecai’s call to courage is a stick and carrot: If you try and save your life, you will lose it (stick); rather, you have a significant role to play in God’s master plan of redemption (carrot). It is not insignificant that when Jesus calls his disciples to be courageous, he carries the same stick, “For those who want to save their life will lose it” and the same carrot, “and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35).



Esther's response . . . "Bring it." Well, perhaps in the Living Bible it is. The NIV account is as follows:

"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16)

A remarkable story of courage, agreed? But note this: if you were browsing for books or study guides on Esther you would find titles such "Esther: woman of faith" or "Esther: God's faithful servant." The story neither mentions the word faith or courage so why would we only see faith here?

The problem is this: in Scripture an act of courage typically manifests both faith and courage, but the spiritual glasses through which we read the text, sees only the faith. Faith and courage are not the same thing or else only believers could be heroes and that's clearly not the case. Faith, love, loyalty, passion, and commitment: all of these can create the drum roll for an act of courage but are not themselves courage. You could have faith and still act like a weasel (think of the Apostle Peter's denial) or be without faith and still be courageous. That Esther has faith is indisputable, why else would she call others to fast? Yet the prominence, uncertainty and resolve of the statement "If I perish, I perish" clearly directs our attention to her courage—her willingness to die.

To recognize that we are, indeed, wearing such spiritual spectacles, consider this question: What is the greatest act of courage in the Bible? I wonder if you thought immediately of The Cross. Jesus' death for our sin is the most courageous act in all of history. What is courage but the willingness to die so that others may live? Jesus died an infinite death to give us an eternal life—an act of infinite courage! Yet, when we look at the Cross what we see is "love." Of course it's "love," the Cross is dripping with it, but having labeled it as such, we no longer see the courage in it—virtue myopia. Courage is simply not in our field of vision, so unless the text explicitly labels the virtue as it does in Joshua, we will invariably see only faith or love.

In light of the fact that biblical heroics typically manifest both faith and courage, and not just faith, my point and example of Esther has in fact several dozen sub-points with headings such as Nehemiah, Moses, Daniel, David, Elijah, Paul, Peter, Jeremiah, etc. All models of faith, all models of courage: they all

stared down the barrel of a loaded tyrant as Esther did and were fortunate to walk away under their own power. If we remove the faith-faithfulness blinders as we read the Scriptures, courage clearly emerges as a predominant virtue integral to most great acts of faith and redemption.

But before we leave Esther, let me throw out this remaining crust of thought. Esther's anthem, "If I perish I perish" seems to pluck the same chords of "guts and glory" as the declaration of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, just prior to being thrown into the fiery furnace, "the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17,18). It isn't possible for the affirmations of "But if he doesn't he doesn't" and "If I perish I perish" to stick their chests out any further, highlighting the "uncommon" in valor and the "undaunted" in courage. Now to my point: both the books of Esther and Daniel speak to believers who have to live out their faith in the hostile environment of exile. I want to suggest that the Scriptures are showing us that courage is prerequisite to living out our faith in the context of a fallen and godless world, when we venture outside the community of faith and out into the perilous community of unbelief.

## THE DISCIPLES

As we look at this third and final example from the New Testament, there are some parallels with the Joshua account: a similar situation and a similar call to courage.

If you want to locate the author within their written work, you look for their bones—that is, their outline: the underlying skeletal structure over which the narrative is stretched. Herein is buried the authorial intent. Luke buried one of his bones in chapter 9, verse 51, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." From this point forward in the Gospel we are to read Jesus' words and actions in the context of his final journey to Jerusalem, in the cast shadow of the cross that awaits him. All of the events and messages from chapters 10 through 20 are injected with the urgency of catching a now-departing flight—last warnings, last instructions, last appeals—last chance.

One of those last warnings/encouragements is addressed to his disciples. In Luke 12, Jesus is more



than just a little concerned about how his disciples will hold up against hostile opposition after he's gone. When the persecution starts will they be men or mice? The message won't travel far if the messengers won't come out from under the bed.

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

"I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." (Luke 12:4-12)

Like the taking of the Promised Land in Joshua, we are at another critical juncture in the plan of redemption: the critical juncture. Everything is on the line, literally everything—mankind, the heavens, the earth, the universe, black holes, dark matter, super novae . . . everything. In the impending cosmic battle of the cross and resurrection, there is any number of things that could threaten the plan, but as in the book of Joshua, Jesus sees cowardice as perhaps the most menacing. Yes, sir, everything is moving like clockwork: the Son of Man is heading to Jerusalem, there he'll suffer and die and everything looks to be coming off without a hitch, unless . . . well, unless his disciples lack the courage to be his witnesses. This would be highly problematic.

And so with words akin to those spoken by God to Joshua ("I will never leave you nor forsake you" Joshua 1:5) Jesus assures them that God's presence will go with them, "Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows"; "do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."

But while Jesus' words are encouraging they are also unyielding. He will hold on to their hand: not only to comfort but to tether them from running away. The movie *Enemy at the Gates* relays the story of how the Russians courageously held Stalingrad against a better-trained and equipped German army. The rousing motivational speech given by the Russian commander was as follows, "Deserters will be shot." While lacking the softer edges of, "There's no 'I' in team," I'd guess it was highly more effective, communicating that cowardice was unacceptable and retreat intolerable. While undoubtedly spoken in ruthlessness, there is necessity to this kind of motivation. If you are to climb into the ring with death, your mind cannot be splintered with doubts or escape plans: retreat cannot be an option or it will be selected. That's why Spartan women sent their sons off to war with the admonition "come back with your shield or on it." Jesus does not share the callousness of a Russian commander or Spartan mother, but he does seek to take retreat off the table as a potential alternative for his followers. His words, more tonally consonant with those spoken by Gene Krantz to Mission Control during the crisis of Apollo 13: "Failure is not an option."

Looking at Joshua 1 and Luke 12, there's something annoyingly absent, something frustratingly unanswered: How? How exactly are we supposed to "be courageous"? What steps do we follow? Typically, virtues and vices can be broken down into constituent parts: bite-size pieces that allow us to see the building blocks of love, the steps to forgiveness or the anatomy of a lie. Courage seems to be a singular, naked act of the will with no stutter-steps or stepping-stones: you simply choose to act, jump, fight, throw yourself on a live hand grenade. I imagine the creative team at Nike arriving at this realization.

"Okay, so what moves a person to push themselves: pressing their bodies and minds beyond physical limits, enduring agony and the prospect of failure, humiliation and defeat?"

"I don't know, they 'Just Do it.'"

## OBSERVATIONS

Unfortunately words are cheap: if they cost as much as gasoline, I'm sure I would have used them more economically, but now I find myself with the need to review and condense what we've gleaned from Scripture before turning to more practical concerns.



**Biblical emphasis:** The Bible is not Homer and does not bestow upon courage the status of über-virtue, but clearly assigns it prominence, and in the arenas of crisis and conflict, indispensability. Because acts of great courage are also acts of great faith, faith tends to dominate our field of vision and eclipse our awareness of courage, leading us to value courage far less than the Scriptures do. Faith, love, hope, loyalty, commitment, etc., all prime us and incline us to rise to the moment, but courage is a distinct virtue, an irreducible act of the will—we either seize the moment or live with remorse.

**The Paradox of Courage:** As Chesterton poetically observes, courage is “a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die,” a willingness to walk within an inch of death in order to take hold of life. Like the principle of “resurrection,” courage seeks to transform death into life.

**Biblical Motivation and Encouragement:**

Recounting the heroics of Esther, Daniel, and a cloud of other witnesses, the Scriptures first and foremost hold up the example of courageous men and women. As negative role models are not without pedagogical value, Scripture equally exposes us to the shame and cowardice of those in recess when history called upon their vote—Pilate for example. Our ultimate example of courage is, of course, Jesus Christ, “because [he] suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (1Peter 2:21-23).

God’s presence in the midst of our struggles is always a sustaining motivation and the promise of “I will be with you” echoes throughout Scripture, escorting the faithful as they walk the “green mile.” But perhaps the most unexpected form of encouragement is the stern exhortations that state, in no uncertain terms, “retreat is unacceptable.” To remove “retreat” as an option is to restore clarity and focus to a mind fractured with anxiety and fear. Last, the Scriptures provide encouragement through vision and hope. Dire circumstances create a stage and spotlight for courage to perform, but the act is done in the enclosure of darkness. Scripture sheds light on the significance of the moment as well as the life and reward awaiting the completed performance. “He who overcomes will inherit all this . . .” (Rev. 21:7).

**When Courage is imperative:** Courage is most

called on as the Kingdom of God expands and conflicts with the kingdom of this world. Why did Joshua need courage? He’s fighting a war to expand God’s kingdom on planet earth. Why did the disciples need courage? The same. As Satan and the world stand opposed to the Kingdom of God, courage is a necessity in any effort to expand God’s Kingdom. Put another way, expansion of God’s kingdom will always meet with rabid, tenacious, even violent opposition, and courage is what is needed to meet that opposition and not run from it.

## COURAGE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Heretofore we have been speaking of courage with a capital “C”: ultimate, epochal, life-and-death decisions where the fate of the free world hangs in the balance. That’s fine, we needed to enlarge it to study the pixels. But few of us live the life of Underdog and so we need to take the discussion out of the clouds and see how courage plays out at street level, in the day-to-day functioning of ordinary mortals. Kennedy was right when he observed:

“Without belittling the courage with which men have died, we should not forget those acts of courage with which men...have lived. The courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment; but it is no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy.”

If courage is necessitated by the expansion of God’s Kingdom against hostile opposition, we should expect to need it daily and carry it with the regularity of bottled water, for what else is evangelism and discipleship but the expansion of God’s Kingdom in us (against the opposition of the flesh) and in the world (against the opposition of Satan). Witness in the world and workplace will inevitably meet with opposition, and without courage we will not do it; living out a godly lifestyle will at times scandalize and offend the ungodly, and without courage we will not live it; spiritual growth will meet with fierce resistance from the flesh, and without courage we will not overcome it. The Christian life is a battle and I cannot think of many successful militias that have found courage to be superfluous. With this in mind, let’s look at the role courage plays in our daily battles against the flesh, the world, Satan and anything else that gets in our way.

## THE MISSING INGREDIENT IN SANCTIFICATION

For spiritual growth to take place, repentance must take place. For repentance to take place one must be



confronted with the truth of their sin, and to hear that truth takes courage. To hide from that truth is to stunt spiritual growth. As spiritual health and medical health are not without parallels, consider this truth encounter in medical terms:

Some years ago I began noticing a shortness of breath: walking up a flight of stairs felt like walking up to the torch on The Statue of Liberty. My sedentary lifestyle, augmented by a unique high fat, high carb, low fiber diet, was certainly a potential catalyst, but I suspected the problem was far more grave. There's a history of lung disease in my family and I couldn't help but think that something was seriously wrong—yet I still didn't want to go to the Doctor. The reason was simple: I was scared to hear the truth. As irrational as it may be, I was happier not knowing. But murmurs and lies fill the vacancy of truth and I began to imagine all manner of congenital defects. Eventually I came to believe that it would be better to know the truth, to possibly fix what was wrong with me, than to live in the misery of worry, fear and denial. So I made an appointment with the Doctor and came to find out I have asthma. Asthma! Once I was willing to face the truth then—and only then— could I be treated, which in my case was a fluorescent purple inhaler.

As I hate to be taken for an idiot when I read, I'll assume you see the spiritual parallels of my illustration without correlating each line. Similar illustrations and parallels are everywhere: Harvard's leadership guru, Ronald Heifetz, observes the same principle in leadership, "The real heroism of leadership involves having the courage to face reality . . . mustering the courage to interrogate reality is a central function of a leader." These are reflections of spiritual reality. Nothing is more fearful and requires more courage than to hear a negative diagnosis of our soul, for this is to understand who and what we really are. While I can distance myself from my asthma and maybe even my leadership, there's no other way to take spiritual truth except "personally." Hebrews 4:12, explains why truth can be so terrifying:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

This certainly explains it: confronting spiritual truth is a knife fight. Spiritual truth threatens to mortally wound our pride, ego and reputation; to kill our protective delusions and denials; to tear from us our

medicating dreams and fantasies and rip open our hidden motives, fears, and sin. It takes courage to square-off with this knife-wielding maniac.

Of course over the years we've all acquired thick layers of body armor: rationalizations, denials, distractions and medications, which make us all but impervious to truth. In the end we hear only what we want to hear. "The truth? You can't handle the truth!" Quite right.

But the sting of truth is the very thing that makes us well, producing godly sorrow and true repentance. Experiencing the pain of our sin, not simply assenting to it, is what helps us to turn from it and never want to go back. It also allows for a genuine encounter with grace. Grace is experienced as "relief" only when there has been the throb of pain.

I'll ask God in my Quiet Times very specific, very difficult questions and I'll wait, and want to hear the answer. Being charismatically challenged, I don't always hear an answer, so I've actually had greater success spring boarding off the context of disagreements, personal criticism or the judgments of others. I ask God things like: "Is this true about me?" "Am I being defensive, trying to protect/defend myself?" "What do you want me to hear in these thoughts/comments/criticisms?" "What role did my own sin play in this?" Like Global Positioning, this triangulation of God-me-criticism is helpful in locating truth.

And if you still haven't had your fill of truth you can always interrogate others and ask them questions you don't really want to hear the answers to: "Do I talk to much?" "Do I talk about myself too much?" "Do I listen well?" "Does it seem like I think my opinions or ideas are better than yours?" "Do I gossip too much?" I don't do this very often: partly because I know the answers and there's no point in humiliating myself, and partly because I'm still wanting in courage and can only "bear so much reality," as T.S. Elliot would say.

## COURAGE TO LIVE OUT THE TRUTH

Winston Churchill once said that "Without courage, all virtue is fragile: admired, sought after, professed, but held cheaply and surrendered without a fight." C.S. Lewis rounds out the thought, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." Churchill, and Lewis shared a similar observation that in moments of crisis, courage is the enforcing virtue that keeps all the other virtues



intact, preserved from corruption and compromise. The moment a virtue is most needed is also the moment it is most difficult to perform. So, what good is a virtue like honesty, wonders Lewis and Churchill, if in dire circumstances you'd lie to save your own neck. Without courage, we will shed any virtue like a raincoat at the moment we need it most.

If embracing the painful truth about us is the first way in which courage transforms our Christianity into something resembling Christ-likeness, the second, then, is in the temerity to live out our faith under pressure or at the "testing point" as Lewis puts it. For example, it took no courage whatsoever for the Scottish missionary and Olympic runner, Eric Little, not to run on Sunday. It took a staggering amount when an entire nation was counting on him to do otherwise. Nor does it take courage to give your perspective on the war in Iraq, unless you are General Petraeus speaking to congress and the fate of thousands of soldiers and the hatred of millions of Americans hinges on what you communicate one way or the other. That would take courage. They should probably give him another medal because he doesn't have that many.

These are extreme examples, but daily we experience this same dynamic of having to live out our beliefs amid the tide of social pressures.

Personally, I never struggle with gossip, exaggeration, being critical or judgmental . . . unless I'm with people. Nor do I struggle with materialism unless I'm exposed to advertisements for things I want, and lust isn't a problem as long as I don't see any women or have some device that makes pornography only a mouse-click away. When we diligently seek to live a godly life in the context of a sinning world, we realize just how strong the winds are against us, and how much courage it takes not to be swept away. As Lewis said, "You only know the strength of the wind when you try to walk against it."

To stand up for one's convictions and live out biblical values in the public arena takes courage, for we do so only through risk of death: death to our reputation, death to our status, death to our ego, death to acceptance and approval, death to our popularity, death to relationships, death to upward mobility, etc. etc. etc. Yet as Chesterton said of courage, it is "a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die." We are willing to walk within an inch of all this professional and personal carnage in order to pursue

life: more life, greater life, more life than we have now, so that others may have life, for our own spiritual vitality (life), or for the life (glory) of Christ. To be a coward would be to run from the conflict, to choose a lesser life, and to renounce greater life in the form of any and all spiritual blessings.

As I believe courage to be a missing vitamin in spiritual growth, I likewise wonder if our lack of emphasis, encouragement and teaching on it has been a major source of our less than compelling cultural witness. Such things are hard to prove of course, but one thing that could be stated with surety: in countries where courage is valued or intrinsically a part of what it means to be a Christian, there's no scarcity or shortage of zeal.

## TELLING THE TRUTH

In affirming the sincerity of his commitment to the Thessalonians, Paul states, "We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition (1 Thess. 2:2)." It's a shame there weren't footnotes in the original manuscript, because a big fat one belongs next to the word "dared." The footnote should read, "See Acts 16:22-23" which says:

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison . . . (Acts 16:22-23)

This passage describes what happened to the apostle Paul in the city of Philippi. After being beaten in Philippi, Paul heads to Thessalonica, but Thessalonica is only a couple days walk from there, so think about it: when Paul arrives in Thessalonica his entire back is one raw, furrowed, bleeding wound, that's just beginning to scab over from his "severe" beating in Philippi. His head is no-doubt throbbing and he probably feels like he has a fever of 105. So when it says that he "dared" to tell them the gospel, it means not only had he just endured a "severe" beating; not only had he preached to them in considerable pain; but he did so knowing full well that the same thing was likely happen again. Can you image the courage?

It takes courage to hear the truth, it takes courage to live out the truth, and it also takes courage to proclaim the truth (the gospel). The apostle Paul "dared to tell [them the] gospel in spite of strong opposition."



But note the context. He is not telling this to the Thessalonians to prove he was an apostle, or that he had suffered for Christ: he is telling them this to demonstrate how sincerely he loved them. Paul so wanted them to experience the life of the gospel that he was willing to face death to bring it to them—“A strong desire [for life] taking the form of a readiness to die.”

I think when we encounter fear, an inability to communicate, or ignorance of what to say, we assume that there’s something wrong with us, and that evangelism couldn’t possibly be as difficult, as awkward, and as terrifying for others as we experience it to be. Actually, I think this is the norm. I think it’s always been the norm. I don’t think that people have ever just shared the gospel—I think they’ve always “dared” to share the gospel. As John McCain observed, . . . Courage is not the absence of fear, but the capacity of action despite our fears.”

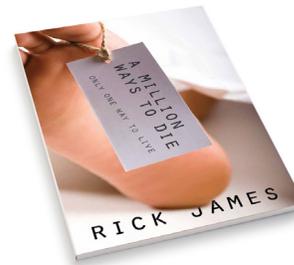
We all stand at the end of a long line of faithful witnesses: a two thousand year old game of telephone as the gospel has passed from person to person to person down through ages. At every link of the chain there was an exercise of courage—someone “dared” to tell someone else the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel has come to us by way of courage and it will pass no further from us without courage. We are all the lowest limbs on a spiritual family tree, branching back to the disciples, and our particular family line will cease to blossom when courage ceases to blossom.

Well, this chapter is getting too long, “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated —the world was not worthy of them” (Hebrews 11:32-38).

## LAST WORDS

Tim O’Brien in his book *The Things They Carried* gives quite a bit of reflection on courage. He recalls a time in the fourth grade when a girl in his class was dying of cancer. Some bully ripped the scarf off her head revealing her absence of hair from the chemotherapy. O’Brien adored this girl and as she burst into tears he wanted to intervene, step in and protect her. But he didn’t. Years later he reflects in his book, “I should’ve stepped in; fourth grade is no excuse. Besides, it doesn’t get easier with time, and twelve years later, when Vietnam presented much harder choices, some practice at being brave might’ve helped.”

Courage in the big choices, begins and is the extension of courageous choices we make every day, or don’t. Courage to hear the truth about ourselves, courage to stand up for the truth and courage to proclaim the gospel. If we’re dying every day, it won’t be difficult to die some day. And so we embrace daily the death in courage.



Rick James is Publisher of CruPress. This article is an excerpt from the book “A Million Ways to Die.”