

Why Courage Matters

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In April 2008, President George W. 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 2006.



Beneath his shirt, Bush wore a gold replica of Monsoor’s dog tags. As he brought Monsoor’s parents to stand beside him, he could hardly hold himself together as he struggled against tears.¹

In May 2006, Monsoor had been the hero of another rescue — one he survived — saving the life of a teammate while risking his own. 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.”²

“Mikey looked death in the face that day and said, ‘You cannot take my brothers. I will go in their stead.’”

But in September 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. 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.’”³

War is a billion acts of courage and cowardice — and this is just on the battlefield. What about a surviving spouse or parent? You couldn’t say that that moment of “looking death in the face” takes more courage than having to see it every day on the face of a son or daughter, could you?

On the day Bush awarded Monsoor the Medal of Honor, our nation honored true courage. But courage hasn’t always enjoyed this kind of approval rating. For the decades prior to September 11, 2001, America’s stock in the moral commodity had been on a steady decline — and in no place was this more visible than on the battlefields of Hollywood.

“Catch 22” probably started it all, but the honor might need to be shared with “All’s Quiet on the Western Front.” Then there was “M*A*S*H,” then “Apocalypse Now” and “The Deer Hunter.” 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 some of these movies occasionally salute noble values, many scenes give us an alternative narrative and an

alternate definition of bravery.

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casualty with some scripts presenting a definition more disturbing than the last: courage as the dolt-eyed nationalism of mindless cattle; as a suicidal impulse; the despair of nothing left to lose; a mind drugged with revenge, prejudice, and terror; or an aberrant pathology that just happens to love the smell of napalm in the morning.

Before Sept. 11, the conceptual framework of courage in this country was in decay. But as the twin towers crumbled, selfless servants rushed in, risking everything. In doing so, they transformed the ash and rubble of Ground Zero into a towering memory of modern courage. Sept. 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. Courage had returned to its place in the forefront of American consciousness.

I've taken this historical back trail 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 tuxedo: Should times and trends change, we're optimistic it will still fit.

However, I think the predominant source of our neglect is that we don't have a file folder for courage. It doesn't fit into a category of spiritual disciplines like Bible study, prayer or daily devotions, and it never made it to our top 10 list of Christian virtues. It was even snubbed as a nominee for "fruit of the Spirit" (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control). It is as if courage 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 Scripture highly values that we can afford to

ignore. Yet, we probably haven't even noticed it's gone missing.

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For example, let's say I worked for the ACME box company. What 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? What would you ask me as you sought to diagnose the problem and locate the source of my evangelistic impotence? "Are you doing devotions every morning? Have you prayed 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 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 the rudeness) to ask me if I were just being a coward, or say, "It sounds to me, Rick, like you're just plain yellow."

And yet, if I don't share the gospel in any reasonable way, if people don't even know I'm a Christian, more than likely it's because fear has shut me up — fear of losing my job, of what others think of me, of not getting promoted, or of being judged or losing friends.

According to the Oxford dictionary, what I've just defined is cowardice and 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 toward boldness, but courage is its own action, its own virtue and must either be exercised ... or not.

Think of how the Christians you know respond to an obvious sin issue. They can appear oblivious to the presence of the moral disorder, yet to those close to them. Is the problem that the Holy Spirit hasn't spoken to them about this issue? Or is the problem that they don't have the courage to face the painful truth about themselves?

So when I say that courage has disappeared from the forefronts of our minds, I mean that when

problems arise in our spiritual lives, we tend to look only to the traditional gauges of community, Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, unconfessed sin, et cetera. 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?

If, as believers, we haven't noticed that courage has gone missing, what hope is there for broader society?

"Yes, sir, I'm a coward all right. Can't run away from danger fast enough."

If, as believers, we haven't noticed that

courage has gone missing, what hope is there for broader society? For instance, in the wake of corporate corruption and an economic crisis, business schools have been retooling their ethics curriculum — most notably, Harvard, whose illustrious alumni include Enron's Jeff Skilling. But where does the problem truly lie? Is the issue one of immoral executives doing something wrong, or is it a problem of moral co-workers doing nothing about it? Is it the avarice of one or the cowardice of many? For every greedy mastermind, there are typically dozens of appeasers, enablers and "yes men" — lieutenants who are well aware of the problem even if they might be ignorant of details.

John McCain wrote the following in his treatise on courage, "Why Courage Matters":

"Courage is like a muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. I sometimes worry that our

collective courage is growing weaker from disuse. We don't demand it from our leaders, and our leaders don't demand it from us. The courage deficit is both our problem and our fault. As a result, too many leaders in the public and private sectors lack the courage necessary to honor their obligations to others and to uphold the essential values of leadership. Often, they display a startling lack of accountability for their mistakes and a desire to put their own self-interest above the common good. Corporate America has taken significant blows to its reputation because too many executives don't have the courage to stand up for what they know is right."⁴

Courage, it would seem, has left the building, and we must go after it before it flees and hides. 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 just so we know what it is we should be running toward.

The Definition of Courage

As the thesis of this book has to do with death, not courage, 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, laying our lives 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.

We find that courage, like a complex molecule, is as strongly bonded to life as it is to death. 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, his calculations happened in an instant. 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 a "slovenly autobiography," it's a rather unique intellectual journey. For Chesterton, the virtue of courage was a signpost leading to God and away from atheism

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because it seemed to defy any kind of "survival of the fittest" mentality. This was also the case on Sept. 11,

when firemen willingly traded in their lives for strangers unable to save themselves.

For Chesterton, true paradoxes were clearly the fingerprint of a Creator, and Jesus as the God-man was chief among them. In his well-known description of courage in "Orthodoxy," Chesterton

beautifully articulates the paradox of courage:

“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.”⁵

Courage, roughly defined, is a passion for life manifested in a willingness to die; a desire for life that’s so strong that one is willing to walk within an inch of death to get it; desiring “lifelike water” yet “drinking death like wine.”

So, returning to my previous 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 own sin, courage would manifest itself in a desire for greater spiritual life, godliness, and intimacy with God. In this person, the desire for life would be strong enough to drive them from the safe cover of mediocrity and denial, into the openness of truth.

Virtue is defined as behavior deemed to be good or of a high moral standard. It would seem like

“arriving 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 significant 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 also highly venerated.

My point is this: Society is not a reliable gauge for determining which virtues are important and what value to place on them. For this, we must turn to Scripture. But as you can find biblical support for many virtues, including cleanliness and caring for the environment, we must determine the relative value and importance conferred by God’s Word. So courage is in the Bible, but just how important is it? As we’ll see in the following chapters, I think the answer is “very.”

While visiting a Sicilian military hospital in 1943, General George Patton came across a young soldier weeping from battle fatigue. Patton expressed his compassion by slapping the boy in the head and calling him a coward, an incident that nearly cost Patton his command. As we turn to the Scriptures and see the importance God places on courage,

He is not berating us for our failures. He cares more than we can imagine about our struggles...

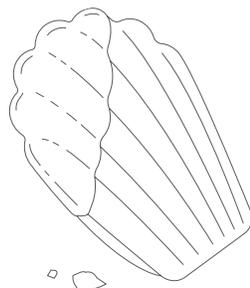
perhaps we can ponder where we have failed to measure up.

However, it's quite important we not see Christ as General

Patton. He is not berating us for our failures. He cares more than we can imagine about our struggles, and "because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help [us] who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18, New International Version).

"No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once, the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory; it was me. I had ceased to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal."⁶

It's amazing what one person can experience in the single bite of a



cookie. In this case, the cookie was a madeleine, the writer Proust, and the novel, "Swann's Way." This novel is often regarded as the first truly modern novel exposing the reader, with arcane detail (Proust at one point goes 356 words without a period), to the complex interior and emotional life of the characters. "Only thoughts and feelings," as Virginia Woolf put it, "no cups and tables."

This "stream of consciousness" narrative is a modern literary invention circa the turn of the 20th century. In previous centuries, authors of fiction and nonfiction alike weren't concerned with such internal absorption. Emotional states were simplified, not dissected. People were "happy" back then. And on this account, the Gospels are true to their era. The gospel writers did not write about emotions in detail, so we can wrongly see the experience of the first disciples as very one-dimensional.

In Luke 7, for example, when a prostitute barges into a Pharisees' dinner party and wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, we assume that she was so overcome with remorse she didn't care what people thought. Should we assume she didn't care, wasn't embarrassed, or that this act didn't take courage? Should we assume her mind contained one, and only one, emotion?

In John 11, when Mary and Martha ask Jesus and the disciples to come to Bethany to attend to Lazarus, the text tells us, "Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us

also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16, NIV). Because John doesn’t choose to tell us how they “felt” about potentially dying, should we assume they were ambivalent or that it was an easy choice to make?

My point is that as we survey the biblical testimony on courage, we’ll find courage demonstrated in many places — even when the text doesn’t specifically label it so. And instead of assuming the Holy Spirit blunted all fear and trepidation like morphine, thus making courage superfluous, we should assume that the situations in which the disciples found themselves were every bit as terrifying as they appear, and that their choice to be obedient was a courageous one, neither easy nor euphoric.

Joshua

In the opening minutes of the film “Saving Private Ryan,” you can nearly 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 only moments before the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe. This is essentially the scene 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 one ways this mission could go sideways, spiritually as well as militarily. But Israel’s Commander and Chief on high seems preoccupied with only one thing: the potential for cowardice in His general.

Issued no less than four times in the first chapter of Joshua is this refrain “Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6), “Be strong and very courageous” (1:7), “Be strong and courageous” (1:9), “Only be strong and courageous” (1:18). God’s omniscience means He has war-gamed every scenario. 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.

There are times in Scripture, times in salvation history, when courage is unequivocally what counts.

Here at the most crucial moment in the most crucial battle for the Promised Land, the panoramic view of Scripture narrows to a squint at one

person and one virtue. It’s as if God says 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 cowardice of man. I’m just trying to make a point: There are times in Scripture, times in salvation history, when courage is unequivocally what counts.

Esther

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

The setting of the book of Esther is during Israel’s Babylonian captivity. The Persian king Xerxes, having recently banished his wife Vashti, is in the market for a new queen. In what sounds like a reality TV show, Xerxes 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, 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 enormous courage on Esther’s part, and to strengthen her resolve, Mordecai gives this infamous order.

“For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14, English Standard Version).

Mordecai’s call to courage is both a stick and carrot: If you try and save your life, you will lose it (stick); but if you act, you have a significant role to play in God’s master plan of redemption (carrot). It is

significant 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, New Revised Standard Version).

Esther’s response is essentially, “Bring it on.” Well, perhaps another translation reads that way. The ESV account is as follows:

“Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”

Esther 4:16



“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:16, ESV).

Hers is a remarkable story of courage, wouldn’t you agree? However, if you browsed for books or study guides on Esther, you would find titles such as “Esther: Woman of Faith,” or “Esther: God’s Faithful Servant.” The stories and studies rarely mention the word courage.

The problem is this: In Scripture, an act of courage typically manifests both faith and courage, but our spiritual glasses often only see the faith component. Faith and courage are not the same thing or else only believers could be courageous, and this is clearly not the case.

Faith, love, loyalty, passion and commitment: All of these characteristics can create the drumroll for an act of courage but are not themselves courage. You could have faith and still act with cowardice (think of the apostle Peter’s denial) or act without faith and still act courageously. That Esther had 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. Surely 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 — which was an act of infinite courage! Yet, when we look at the cross, what we often see is an act of love. Having labeled it as such, we rarely see Jesus’ courage. Many times, courage is simply not in our field of vision.

In light of the fact that biblical heroics typically manifest both faith and courage and not just faith, the point of the book of Esther is the point made as well through the stories of Nehemiah, Moses, Daniel, David, Elijah, Paul, Peter, Jeremiah, et

cetera. All of these are models of faith, and all of these are models of courage. They all stared down the barrel of a loaded tyrant as Esther did and walked 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 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 prior to their being thrown into the fiery furnace. “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But even if he does

not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17–18, NIV). These words highlight how uncommon their valor and undaunted their 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 show us that courage is a prerequisite to living out our faith in the context of a fallen and godless world, especially when we venture outside the community of faith.

The Disciples

As we look at this third and final example of courage, this one from the New Testament, there are some interesting parallels with the Joshua account: a similar situation and a similar call to courage. But more on this in a moment.

If you wanted to locate the author within their writings, look for their bones — that is, their outline — the underlying skeletal structure over which the narrative is stretched. Herein we find 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” (NIV). From this point forward in Luke, we 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 departing flight — last warnings, last instructions, last appeals.

One of those last messages 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?



“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do ... fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

Luke 12:4-5

The message won’t travel far if the messengers won’t come out from under the bed.

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:4–12, ESV).

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,

supernovas ... everything. In the impending cosmic battle of the cross and the resurrection, any number of things 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 God speaks to Joshua ("I will never leave you nor forsake you," Joshua 1:5, NIV), Jesus assures them that God's presence will go with them:

"Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31, NIV), and " ... 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 12:11-12, NIV).

But while Jesus' words are encouraging, they are also unyielding. He will hold their hands — not only to comfort them, but to keep them from running away.

The movie "Enemy at the Gates" relays the story of how the Russians courageously held Stalingrad against the well-trained and better-equipped German Army. The rousing motivational speech given by the Russian commander was simple: "Deserters will be shot." While lacking the softer

edge of, "There's no 'I' in team," I guess it was highly effective, communicating that cowardice was unacceptable and retreat intolerable.

While undoubtedly ruthless, this kind of motivation is necessary. If you are to climb into the ring with death, your mind cannot splinter with doubts or escape plans. Retreat cannot be an option, or it will be selected, which is 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 a Spartan mother, but He does eliminate retreat as a potential alternative for His disciples. His words resonate

with those spoken by Gene Kranz to Mission Control during the "Apollo 13" crisis, according to the movie: "Failure is not an option."

Looking at both Joshua 1 and Luke 12, one question is 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 steppingstones; you simply choose to act, jump, fight or throw yourself on a live hand grenade.

I imagine the creative team at Nike arriving at

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I imagine the creative team at Nike arriving at

this realization: “OK, 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.”

On this account, even William Miller, author of the courage tome “The Mystery of Courage,” offers little advice. In a humble and good-natured response to the question of how one learns to be courageous, Miller suggests, “It helps to read stories.” Miller basically shrugs and says, “Not sure. You might try picking up a biography on Lincoln or something.”⁷

Any number of things can propel one to act courageously, but courage is a distinct act and a distinct virtue, separating those who “just do it” from those who just don’t.

As John F. Kennedy observed in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book “Profiles in Courage”:

“The stories of past courage can define that ingredient — they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this, each man must look into his own soul.”

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. Biblical emphasis: The Bible is not “The Iliad.” It does not bestow upon courage the status of uber virtue, though the Bible clearly assigns courage prominence, and in the arenas of crisis and conflict, we see that courage is indispensable. Because acts of great courage are also acts of great faith, faith

Like the principle of “resurrection,” courage seeks to transform death into life.

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, and commitment each 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 observed, courage is “a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die,”⁸ and 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 hold up the examples of courageous men and women. As negative role models have great pedagogical value, Scripture equally exposes us to the cowardice of those lacking courage when history called for their votes — Pilate for example. Our ultimate example of courage is,

of course, Jesus Christ: “To this you were called, because Christ 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” (1 Peter 2:21–23, NIV).

God’s presence in the midst of our struggles is always a sustaining motivation, and this promise of “I will be with you” echoes throughout Scripture as God promises to escort 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 that retreat is unacceptable. To remove retreat as an option is to restore clarity and focus to a mind fractured with anxiety and fear. Lastly, 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. “Those who are victorious will inherit all this” (Revelation 21:7, NIV).

When courage is imperative: Courage is most called on as the kingdom of God expands and conflicts with the kingdoms of this world. Why did Joshua need courage? He needed it to fight

Our ultimate example of courage is, of course, Jesus Christ

a war to expand God’s kingdom on planet earth. Why did the disciples need courage? For the same reason. 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 it will take great courage to meet that opposition without running away.

If this were a class in leadership, we would now close our books, go home and do our assigned reading in *The Life and Times of William Wallace*. But this is not a leadership class, and so what we must do instead is consider the implications of this for how we live.

Everyday Courage

So far we’ve been speaking about courage with a capital “C”: courage in the face of ultimate, epochal, life-and-death decisions in which the fate of the free world hangs in the balance. That’s fine; we needed to enlarge the picture to study the pixels. But we need to take the discussion out of the clouds and see how courage plays out at street level, in the

“Without belittling the courage with which men have died, we should not forget those acts of courage with which men ... have lived.”

John F. Kennedy

day-to-day functioning of ordinary mortals. Kennedy was right when he observed in “Profiles in Courage”:

“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.”⁸

If courage is a necessary ingredient in 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 being a Christ follower about but the expansion of God’s kingdom in us (against the opposition of the flesh) and in the world (against the opposition of Satan)?

Our witness in the world will inevitably meet with opposition, and without courage, we will not succeed. Living out a godly lifestyle can and will at times scandalize and offend the ungodly, and without courage, we will not succeed; spiritual growth will meet with fierce resistance from our own flesh, and without courage, we will not succeed.

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.

Courage: Sanctification’s Missing Ingredient

For spiritual growth to take place, repentance must take place. For repentance to take place, one must be confronted with the truth of his or her 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, let’s consider an example.

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Some years ago, I began experiencing shortness of breath. Walking up a flight of stairs felt like walking up to the torch at the top of 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 direr. 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 and try to fix what was wrong 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 get treatment, which in my case meant using a fluorescent purple inhaler.

I always hate to be taken for a dimwit as a reader, so I'll assume you see the spiritual parallels of my story without me making the correlations. 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."⁹

As difficult as it is to hear the truth about our health or business, nothing requires more courage than to face a negative diagnosis of our soul, for this is the ultimate truth about us. While I can distance myself from my asthma and maybe even my leadership skills, spiritual truth is deeply personal. Hebrews 4:12 (NIV) explains why truth can be so terrifying.

"For the word of God is alive 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."

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 us from our medicating dreams and fantasies; to rip open our hidden motives, fears and sins. It takes courage to face God's truth.

Of course, over the years, we've all acquired thick layers of body armor: rationalizations, denials and distractions that make us all but impervious to truth. In the end, we hear only what we want to hear.

But the sting of truth is the very thing that can make 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 sin and never go back. This experience also allows for a genuine encounter with grace. We experience grace as "relief" only when we have felt pain.

Some years ago, I was with my wife at a Christian retreat. It was a safe environment in which to pray and process truth. As we sat talking, I asked my wife this question: "In the first years of our marriage, I wasn't a very good husband, was I?"

In essence, I was giving her the knife of truth and asking her to stab me with it. Not because I wanted to die — quite the opposite. I didn't want the status

quo in our relationship; I wanted more life out of our marriage. To use Chesterton’s description, I was willing to walk an inch from death in order to get more life. When I handed her the knife, I didn’t need to give instructions. Had they been necessary, they would have looked something like this: “I’m going to ask a question, and it will be hard for me to hear you answer. When I give you the knife, I want you to stab me in the chest with it; anywhere else won’t penetrate all my layers of denial and justification. Emotionally, I’ll probably thrash and roll around on the ground for a while. Just leave me be. And don’t make excuses for me, as this will only hinder the process. Afterward, I’ll need to pray and ingest God’s grace and forgiveness like a couple Tylenol. If we do this right, I should be better; we should be better; my relationship with God should be better.”

Truth is our friend in much the same way as a red-hot poker in the eye is our friend. In reality, this conversation with my wife shouldn’t have been traumatic. But it was. And I remember it because it was painful and also because it was the first time I made a connection between courage and my spiritual growth.

It has since become my habit to ask God in my quiet times specific and difficult questions, and I’ll wait, wanting 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 judgments of others.

I ask God things like: “Is this true about me?” “Am I trying to protect or 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 courageous triangulation of God-me-criticism can be helpful in locating the 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 too 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, partially because I know the answers and there’s no point in humiliating myself — and partially because I lack the courage and can only, as T.S. Eliot said, “bear so much reality.”

Courage to Live 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.”

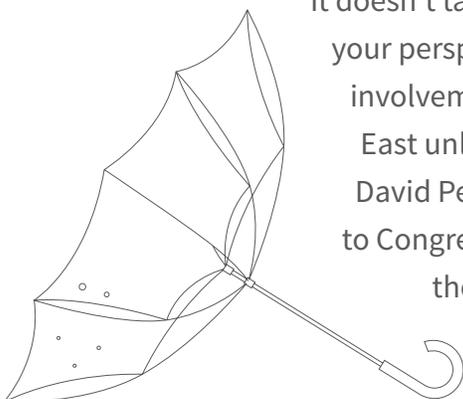
C.S. Lewis rounds out the thought: “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”¹⁰

Churchill and Lewis shared a similar observation that in moments of crisis, courage is the enforcing virtue that keeps all the other virtues intact and preserved from corruption or compromise. The moment a virtue is most needed is also the moment it is most difficult to perform. What good is a virtue like honesty if in dire circumstances you'd lie to save your own neck? Without courage, we'll shed any virtue like a raincoat at the moment we need it most.

Without courage, we'll shed any virtue like a raincoat at the moment we need it most.

If courageously embracing the painful truth about ourselves is the first way we can more closely resemble Christ, the second way 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 Liddell not to run on Sunday. However, it took a staggering amount of courage to hold to his convictions when an entire nation counted on him to do otherwise.



It doesn't take courage to give your perspective on America's involvement in the Middle East unless you're General David Petraeus speaking to Congress and the fate of thousands of soldiers and the anger

of millions of Americans hinges on what you say. Speaking your mind in such circumstances takes courage. (They should probably give him another medal because he doesn't have that many.)

These are extreme examples, but every day we experience this dynamic of having to live out our beliefs amid the tide of social pressures. In an interview about his book, "The Mystery of Courage," William Miller pays tribute to the more generic brands of courage and cowardice that occupy our daily interactions. Miller states:

"I planned on writing about cowardice, the little, daily interactions that you walk away from feeling somehow diminished or demoralized because you didn't stand up, or somebody trod on you or 'dissed' you. You know for sure that you've been a coward when you engage in fantasies of revenge. You'll lie awake or spend the next two hours wishing misery on the person."¹¹

"You only know the strength of the wind when you try to walk against it."

C.S. Lewis

He's exactly right. I never struggle with gossip, exaggeration or 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. Lust isn't a problem as long as I never see a woman or go near a device that makes pornography a mouse click away. When we diligently seek to live a godly life in the context of a sinful world, we realize just how strong the winds are against us and how much courage

we'll need to stand our ground. As C.S. Lewis said, "You only know the strength of the wind when you try to walk against it."

No environment or social context is without its pressures, but the nature of the secular workplace is one of the most challenging. I worked in the creative department of a New York City ad agency, so I'm not even sure where to begin here. But let me just say this: In the context of an important client meeting, it takes courage to stand up and say, "We can't lie and promote something that's untrue about your product." I know it takes courage; otherwise, I'm sure I would have done it.

The last product briefing I attended before going into ministry was for an oil treatment you inject into your car's engine. What does oil treatment do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. According to the product manager it was "like black magic: If you think it works, then it does."

Our assignment was to create ads making it seem like this product was valuable without making an actual claim that it did something (so our client wouldn't get sued). How do you live out your faith in this kind of environment, day in and day out, without leaving your Christianity at home?

How do you keep from bending to the incessant pressure to please, conform, fit in, get along, and get ahead, all while keeping the client happy? Is it me, or am I starting to sound like the Cowardly Lion? "What makes the elephant charge his tusk in

the misty mist, or the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage!"

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 reputation, death to status, death to ego, death to acceptance and approval, death to popularity, death to relationships, death to upward mobility,

Courage is "a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."

G.K. Chesterton

et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Yet, as Chesterton said of courage, it is "a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."¹² We must be

willing to walk within an inch of all this professional and personal carnage in order to pursue life. 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 on courage has been a major source of our less than compelling cultural witness. Such things are hard to prove of course, but one thing can 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 shortage of zeal.

Courage to Tell the Truth

In affirming the sincerity of his commitment to the Thessalonians, Paul states, “We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition” (1 Thessalonians 2:2, NIV). 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, “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 with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison” (NIV).

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, bleeding wound that’s just beginning to scab over from his “severe” beating in Philippi. His head is probably throbbing with a fever of 105 degrees. So when it says that he “dared” to tell them the gospel, it means this: 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 to happen again. Can you imagine this kind of 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 of the gospel. The apostle Paul “dared to tell [them the] gospel in spite of strong

opposition.” But note the context. He does not tell this to the Thessalonians to prove he was an apostle or that he had suffered for Christ. He shares the gospel with them to demonstrate his sincere love for them. Paul

so wanted them to experience the life of the gospel that he was willing to face death to bring it to them.

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, or 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.”¹³

We all stand at the end of a 2000-year-old line of faithful witnesses, as the gospel has passed from person to person down through the ages. At every

It takes courage to hear the truth, it takes courage to live out the truth and it also takes courage to proclaim the truth of the gospel.

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 beyond us without courage. We are 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.

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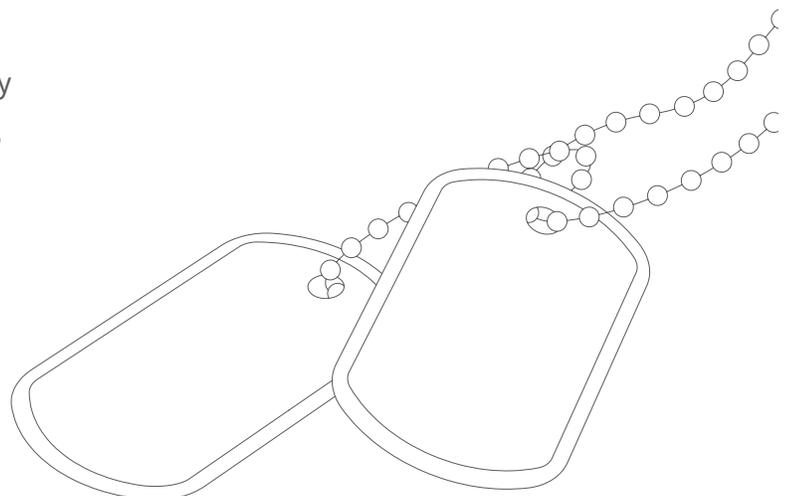
“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon,

Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated — of whom the world was not worthy — wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Hebrews 11:32–38, ESV).

Last Words

In his book “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien reflects on courage. He recalls a time in the fourth grade when a girl in his class was dying of cancer, and 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.”¹⁴

Courage in the big choices is the extension of courageous choices we make — or don’t make — every day. If we’re dying every day, it won’t be difficult to die someday. And so we embrace daily the death in courage.



Endnotes

1. “Bush Emotional at Medal Ceremony for Fallen Navy SEAL,” ABC News’ The Radar blog, April 8, 2008 (<http://blogs.abcnews.com>).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. John McCain, “In Search of Courage,” *Fast Company*, September 2004.
5. G. K. Chesterton, “Orthodoxy” (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 134.
6. Marcel Proust, “In Search of Lost Time, Swann’s Way,” Vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library, 1998), 60.
7. Quoted in William Ian Miller, “The Mystery of Courage” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 64.
8. John F. Kennedy, “Profiles in Courage” (London: Black Dog, 1999), 246.
9. Ronald Heifetz, “The Leader of the Future,” *Fast Company*, May 1999.
10. C. S. Lewis, “The Screwtape Letters” (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 97–8.
11. Laura Miller, “The Mystery of Courage,” *Salon.com*, October 25, 2000.
12. Chesterton, *ibid.*
13. McCain, *ibid.*
14. Tim O’Brien, “The Things They Carried” (New York: Broadway, 1998), 234.

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