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“Take Courage In Jesus.”

Dennis Prager, radio host and author of the Rational Bible, has a strong opinion about courage. In His Rational Bible commentary on Exodus he says, “I am convinced courage is the rarest of all good traits. There are far more kind and honest people than there are courageous people. Unfortunately, however, in the battle against evil, all the good traits in the world amount to little when not accompanied by courage.”

I would agree that courage is fundamentally critical if anything good is accomplished. When we visit Acts chapter 4, we discover very different kinds of disciples than the ones we met on Easter morning, namely ones with courage. In Acts 3 Peter and John heal a beggar over 40 who had been crippled from birth. It was his daily routine to go to the Temple to beg. Peter and John heal the beggar who immediately follows the disciples into the Temple. His dancing and glorifying God for his healing gets the attention of those who always knew him as the beggar at the gate. Peter and John are quick to identify Jesus as the source of the miracle. They are also quick to speak of Jesus resurrected from the dead. Speaking so boldly at the Temple gets the disciples arrested and thrown in jail for the night.

Enter chapter 4. Peter, John, and the former crippled man stand before the same men who crucified Jesus. Verse 5-6 reveal the political players by name. “The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family.” The list of names are Sadducees, and members of the same family. The Sanhedrin was very nepotistic as it seems. These men not only represented the aristocracy, but also the religious group that did not believe in a resurrection and hated Jesus. Now they hate Jesus’ disciples and especially their message. They had put Jesus to death on the cross and now they were looking for ways to “cancel” or silence Jesus’ disciples.

This is where we want to take special notice. In Acts 4:13 we hear, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” “They took note that these men were with Jesus” reveals why they have the courage that they held—they were with Jesus. Peter and John knew whom they followed and what Jesus had done and will do. The evidence was literally standing next to them dancing about praising God. These were not the same men that were hiding behind locked doors on Easter morning, huddled in fear of these very men that they were so bold to witness to by Acts 4. Peter and John were no longer afraid of what may happen to them and boldly chose to follow Jesus rather than heed any threats or warnings not to preach. In this one case we see elements important to courage. Courage deals with the truth and reality of Jesus’ resurrection. Fear only deals with possible scenarios and uncertainties such as the notion of religious leaders combing the streets looking for the disciples. Courage deals with certainty, truth, and gets noticed and respected even by one’s enemies.

We’ve seen it before in Daniel 3 where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to the golden statue. Verses 16-18 displays a bold faith. “¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸But 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.” Courage here says the idol isn’t real and Nebuchadnezzar’s power is limited even if in the moment he seems so strong.

Laster in Daniel 6 that it was Daniel’s turn. Daniel was set up by other leaders who were jealous of Daniel’s position with the king. These leaders convince the king to make a law where all Persian citizens could only worship the king for the next 30 days. They knew Daniel would not abide by the decree. The plan didn’t phase Daniel who went and prayed as he always did. He was hauled before the King and the king, bound by his own law, threw Daniel into the Lion’s Den. An angel shut the mouths of the lions and saved Daniel much to the king’s relief.

In all three examples these men remained bold in their faith. In each case the followers of God were ready to give their lives. Any man willing to sacrifice himself for the cause is hard to stop. Their courage

developed from a deep communion with God. Each one was willing only to worship God alone and serve him only.

What we should all come to realize is that the devil has no new tricks. He will threaten God's people. He will try to silence them in fear. There will always be someone trying to outwit and shut down the church. Courage that is founded in a deep communion with God drives away fear. It doesn't necessarily avoid fiery furnaces, or Lion's dens, or even abuse from the religious leaders but it does have guts to say, "Even if the Lord does not save us from you, we want you to know that we will not serve your stupid idols or buckle to your evil ways."

Courage is the ability to stand your ground refusing to stop even if one is wounded. Courage is inspired by whom we are associated with, namely the resurrected Jesus. Peter and John were no longer afraid of evil men because these same evil men couldn't stop Jesus from rising. The contrast is stark. On the one hand Jesus is resurrected from the dead. On the other hand, there were a bunch of rich, entitled men who thought they could outsmart God but failed miserably. They failed again with Peter and John. The message of Jesus is what gives courage then and what gives us courage today. The circumstances have not changed.

The most powerful part of courage is how it focuses on purpose. In 2016 the movie Hacksaw Ridge came out. It's about Private Desmond Doss, a pacifist and a 7th Day Adventist, who saw himself serving God as a medic in WWII. Many called him a coward. He endured many moments that were cruel and unfair. He even faced a potential dismissal from the military itself but finally won the right to serve without even carrying a gun.

His courage was proven at the Battle of Okinawa. In one of the worst fights the Allies were forced into retreat leaving behind many wounded and many casualties. Doss remained behind. Throughout the night under the cover of darkness Private Doss roamed the battlefield searching for survivors amongst the carnage of bodies and craters. He crawled around careful not to get caught by the Japanese who were wandering about finishing off the wounded. When he would find a wounded man, Doss would drag him to the cliff they climbed up and lower them down to safety where medics would get them to a hospital. By the time he was done he saved 75 soldiers.

The line made famous in the movie was what Doss would say to himself as he went searching for more. "Lord, give me one more, just one more." His courage was motivated by a trust in the Lord. He was in a hostile place willing to give his life surrounded by many who wanted to kill him. This is a picture of courage. Although Doss wasn't saving men for this purpose, but Doss would go on to earn the Medal of Honor for his actions.

Courage by any account is always admired and it gets noticed by the faithful and the unfaithful alike. Courage makes us respectable and powerful. But the last aspect of courage is its impact. Courage will always bring attention to the person who exercises courage. However, that person will likely use this courage to highlight a message and purpose greater than Himself. Doss' message was Jesus and the Gospel. Peter and John's message was Jesus and the Gospel. The three men in the fiery furnace, was the God of Israel as the only true God. For Daniel the message was the God of Israel alone is worthy of worship.

A faith that has courage is an unstoppable faith. This combo will inspire and transform the landscape. May the Lord give us courage to believe and boldness to proclaim it like Peter and John.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30