

Courageous Living

This is the second in a series of messages drawn from Proverbs – that often skipped-over book of the Bible that is filled with wisdom, the gift from God. Proverbs is a book that deals with the theory and practice of wisdom. Last week we saw that the theme of this book is found in its first chapter. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline,"* Proverbs 1:7. A proverb is a short statement that takes the place of a long explanation. The proverbs of the Bible teach us how to live life skillfully from God's point of view. They cover a wide variety of topics concerning life, morality, ethics and decision-making, and human relations, teaching us how to apply God's wisdom and morality to life in society.

Today I want to touch on what Proverbs can teach us about fear and courage. I begin with this verse: *"The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion,"* Prov. 28:1. Are you as bold as a lion? Do you have courage? Do you have the courage to face all manner of challenges? Do you have the courage of your convictions?

What Is Courage?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary says this: *"mental or moral strength to venture persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty."* Other definitions say, "the ability to do something that you know is difficult or dangerous." General George Patten defined it this way: "Courage is fear that holds on for one more minute." Nelson Mandela: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." Most of the popular images of courage are from the battlefield. They have to do with warfare and bloodshed and the crash of armies. I don't doubt in the least that those acts on the battlefield are part of what courage is all about. But there are other ways to understand courage.

The Roman historian wrote, "The desire for safety stands against every great and noble enterprise. Indeed, it takes some courage to step out of our comfort zones. Maybe courage is a family dealing with terminal cancer in a loving and hopeful manner. Or, a single mother raising her family, determined to teach her children what is right and give them opportunity to succeed in life. It is a widow or widower who faces the last years of her/his life without their beloved spouse, yet chooses to live life to the full. It is a seriously disabled person struggling with their self-image and feelings of frustration and rejection, yet determined to overcome and live a fulfilling and productive life. Or, perhaps it is a single person who chooses purity over promiscuity; an engaged couple who wait, even though the world says go ahead. Maybe courage is someone in a large bureaucracy, whether government or business or other organization, who sees something terribly wrong, and has the courage to blow the whistle. No doubt you can think of others. All of these things have something in common:

1. Bravery in the face of danger: "I won't be afraid."
2. Steadfastness in the face of opposition. "I won't give up."
3. Action in the face of resistance: "I won't be intimidated."
4. Optimism in the face of despair: "I won't lose heart."

So, what do you believe about courage, and do you believe you have courage? Would your friends, co-workers and family members call you a courageous person?

Saying Your Prayers

Someone once said, *"Courage is fear that has said its prayers."* The Bible actually has quite a bit to say about courage or overcoming fear. For example: *"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people.... Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go,"* Joshua 1:6-7.

Take courage because you are doing what I have commanded, says God. And **perhaps it takes courage to obey God's laws.**

Again in **Joshua 1:9** it says, **"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."** Courage comes with God's presence. This same theme is echoed in the Psalms: **"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"** Psalm 27:1. The O.T. prophets reminded God's people that courage came with obedience to God and the assurance of His presence.¹

This is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples: **"Perfect love drives out fear," 1 John 4:18. With God present, fear is swept away.** The apostles Paul and Peter understood what Jesus meant.² We were destined as God's people to have courage. **"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."** 2 Timothy 1:7.

Like wisdom, genuine courage comes from God. Here, then, are some reflections on dealing with fear and finding courage as declared in the Bible. I believe God wants us to be courageous, moving from fear to faith.

1. Remember your identity. The proverb says, **"The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion."** The first step to courage is to remember your true identity in Jesus Christ. In Christ you are a new creation, no longer bound to the fear of sin and death. That's the believer's true identity. Reborn in Christ you are strong, victorious, accepted, justified, redeemed, saved, and completely forgiven; your sins washed away. You were born for courage, not for fear. 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of love, of power, and of a sound mind. If you have a spirit of fear or timidity it didn't come from God. That's not God's gift to his people. In Christ you are strong and victorious.

Recall the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY. The American hockey team was made up of men barely out of their teens, some of them still in college, all amateurs. In the semi-finals they faced the mighty Russian team, unbeaten in 20 years of Olympic competition. Their players were imposing, talented, skilled, and experienced. Everyone thought the Americans had a snowball's chance in _____ of beating the Russians. Gathered in the locker room before the game, the coach, Herb Brooks, looked at the faces of his young players and said just one sentence, "Men, you were born to play this game." As one, they arose and went out on the ice and defeated the invincible Russian team and went on to beat Finland to win the gold medal against all odds. Their feat was headlined as the "miracle on ice."³

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we were born to play this. We were born for courage, for bravery, for strength, to be overcomers. God has given us His Spirit. We can't be losers because we were born anew through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit we will be victorious over the problems, struggles, and trials of life.

2. Face your fears. **"The wicked flee when no man pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion."** Fear will take hold of you until you decide to confront it. The whole Israelite army feared the giant, until little David took him down with God's help and a couple small stones from his sling. Fear will win every day until you stand up, look that fear straight in the face, and say, "With the help of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit, I am going to take you down."

How many of you know the 95% Rule of Worry? It's very simple: 95% of the things you worry about won't happen. We have a little plaque in our kitchen that reminds us: "Worry is like a rocking chair. It keeps your busy but doesn't get you anywhere." God has given us a sound mind so that we can look at our problems. He's given us power so we can overcome, and he's given us love so we can respond in His character. There is no reason for a child of God to be gripped and destroyed by fear. A wonderful woman in one of my previous churches used to say, "If you're going to pray why worry. If you're going to worry why pray." With God I can face my fears and find solutions to my problems with tact and common sense. There is no need to worry.

3. Control your self-talk. A healthy mind is absolutely essential to overcoming fear. The Bible says, **"For as he thinks in his heart, so is he,"** Prov. 23:7 NKJ. There's a negative side and a positive side to this.

The negative side is all the destructive messages you give yourself when you pour out all those excuses of why you can't do something great and good. If you say "I can't" then you won't because you've taken away your incentive to try. There are plenty of messages entering into your mind every day that drag you down, telling you it can't be done, you aren't able, it won't work. All this talk feeds your fears. So, put a stop to your own negative self-talk.

The positive side is found in Romans 12:2: *"Be not conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* If you fill your mind with the hope found in the word of God you won't have time to wallow in the pits of fear. Colossians 3:2 tells us to set our mind on things above where Christ dwells with God in heaven. St. Paul, who faced all kinds of dangers, said, *"... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things,"* Philippians 4:8.

Put the word of God in one ear, and fear will go out the other ear. This works if you work it. You have to control your input in the face of your fears so that the Word of God becomes not just something you read on Sunday, but literally the stuff that you live on. *"I will lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth,"* Psalm 121.⁴ Check out Psalm 91.

4. Strengthen your love. What's the guiding force of your life? *"Perfect love casts out fear,"* 1 John 4:18. You can either have the love of God or you can have the fear generated by Satan, but you can't have them both at the same time. One will push out the other. So how do you strengthen God's love in your life?

A. Thank God for the thing that is causing you to fear (counter-intuitive, I know). "Lord, I didn't want this, I'm not sure I deserve this, but I thank you for sending it into my life, because I know you'll see me through and you'll make me stronger through this."

B. List the blessings that have come to you because of the thing that you fear. One of them may well be that now you're praying, reading your Bible, wanting to come to church because you're dying during the week. At long last, God has got your undivided attention!

C. Each day share one of those blessings with one other person.

Final Thoughts

What is courage? It is facing the impossible and dangerous situations of life and still trusting in God, while rejoicing in His goodness. You don't have to add courage. You already have it. Use the courage that God has given you. God put it in you the moment you came to Christ. You already have victory in Jesus Christ. Now live in that victory. You already have power. Use the power that God has given you.

"The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion," Prov. 28:1. What would your life be like if that fear didn't exist? There is an old Italian proverb that says: Better to spend one day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep.

Better to spend one day with courageous faith in God than a whole lifetime cowering in fear. Lift up your head with hope and the confidence that whatever life throws at you, you and God can handle. Take courage, be strong, for the Lord our God is with you.

***"Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble,"* Psalm 119:165.**

¹See Isaiah 51:7; Jeremiah 42:11; Haggai 2:5.

²1 Peter 3:14.

³In 2004 a movie titled "Miracle," based on the events of 1980, chronicled the story leading up to the American team's stunning journey to the Olympic gold medal.

⁴See also Psalm 91.