

# Courage

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## Introduction.

- A. Even though I haven't seen it on TV recently, I suspect just about all of us have seen *The Wizard of Oz*. We all know the story of Dorothy's journey with her three flawed companions along the Yellow Brick Road to get help from the ruler of the Emerald City. It's interesting, though, that of the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Lion, we only describe one of them by his vice. The Scarecrow isn't the Brainless Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman isn't the Heartless Tin Woodman, but the Lion most certainly IS the Cowardly Lion. It's as though we consider him most responsible for his failing. If you're born without a brain or without a heart, that's a shame, but if you don't have courage, then it's your fault. We think courage is important.
- B. Despite this emphasis that we place on courage, probably just about all of us can think of times in our Christian lives when we were not courageous. I can. One incident that really sticks out in my mind was during my third year of law school, when I was one of the student editors on one of UT's legal journals. One of my fellow editors was an absolute potty mouth. He would come into the office every morning and start cussing a blue streak. Although this went on all year long, I never said anything to him. Instead, I laughed uneasily every time he started in and pretended I was OK with it. Nor was that the only time I failed to speak up.
- C. We all know what that's like. We all know what it is to do the easy thing instead of the right thing. However, God's word isn't content to leave us where we are. Although the word "courage" never occurs in Scripture, the concept appears throughout the New Testament, and it's something that God expects us to possess and display in abundance. So. . . how do we get there from here? It's not like the Great and Powerful Oz is going to hand us a medal at the end of the movie. Instead, we need to turn to God's word so that we can learn about both the manifestations of and the motives behind displays of godly courage.

## I. Willingness to Trust.

- A. There are a number of things that can make us courageous, but this morning we're going to look at four of its primary sources. The first of these is willingness to trust. As Christians, we will not have the courage to fully obey God unless we trust Him first. We see a perfect example of this in Peter's response when he sees Jesus walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14:28-31. On an abstract basis, Peter was perfectly willing to consider walking on water to come to Jesus, but when he was really in that position, standing on top of a hundred feet of water, he gave in to fear and doubt instead. This tells us how we need to go one better than Peter. If we truly trust God, we're not just going to talk about all of the scary things that we might conceivably do with His help. Instead, we're going to go out and do them.
- B. All right, so we know what trust looks like, but why should we trust in the first place? How do we know that once we step out of the boat, we aren't going to plummet to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee? Paul gives us his answer in 2 Timothy 1:12, an answer based not on what Paul is doing, but on for whom he is doing it. Paul's trust in God isn't blind or misplaced; instead, it is founded on an understanding of who God is and how firmly His promises are established. Paul knew that whatever God said He would do for His people, no matter how unlikely it sounded, He would follow through. We can have that same confidence today. If we take courage and do what God wants us to do, even when it looks daunting or intimidating, God will get us through.

## II. Willingness to Stand.

- A. In addition to willingness to trust, courage requires willingness to stand. It requires that we be willing to be counted, even when we're the only ones who are being counted. We see an instance of this indifference to popular pressure in Acts 5:27-29. This account is all the more remarkable because of its context. Peter was a nobody, an uneducated fisherman from Galilee, which was the Arkansas of Palestine. This apostolic redneck, though, had been called before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism, filled with 70 experts on Jewish law and custom. This Supreme Court had already told him once not to preach Jesus, he had defied them, and now they had brought him back again, and they might well kill him if he didn't agree to obey this time. But what do Peter and the other apostles say, though? "We must obey God rather than men." They didn't waste any time in trying to placate the Sanhedrin. Instead, they told the leaders of their country straight out that they weren't going to listen. Where we so often are deterred by fear of embarrassment from preaching the gospel, Peter and his associates were willing to defy death to tell others about Christ.
- B. As important as it is in spreading the word, we need to embrace this willingness to stand in every area of our lives. Let me give you another example, the example, actually, that started this whole sermon. I was reading a book recently about Civil War political history, and it told a story about a man named William Henry Seward. Seward was a politician, two-time governor of the state of New York. Shortly after his second term expired in 1846 and Seward returned to his home in upstate New York, a brutal murder occurred nearby. A black man

broke into the house of one of Seward's friends and viciously knifed him, his wife, and his two daughters to death. After he was captured, the murderer did nothing but laugh uncontrollably. It soon became obvious that he was completely out of his mind, but no lawyer in the area was willing to defend him. First of all, the man was black in an era when blacks were still regarded as subhuman, second of all, the jury was going to hang the man, no matter what any lawyer said, and third of all, any lawyer who took on his defense would become ostracized by the community. As a result, no one came forward, until the judge made his final call for counsel. In that crowded courtroom, Seward, the ex-governor of New York, stood up and said, "I'll defend him." Nowadays, it seems that politicians won't even change their socks without taking an opinion poll first, but this politician was willing to sacrifice his career in an effort to save a man who could not be saved. Why? Because he didn't care about the consequences. Because it was the right thing to do. We need to be like that.

C. But why? Why should we be willing to take unpopular and even lonely stands as a Christian? For one thing, we should be willing to do it because we aren't alone as we think. Look at the story of the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 6. Here's what happened: Elisha had been giving the king of Israel reports about what the king of Syria was doing with his army. The king of Syria got sick of this and sent a strike force to kill Elisha. One morning, Elisha's servant stuck his head out the door and saw this army descending on them. We see what happens next in 2 Kings 6:15-17. Isn't that wonderful? As many men as the king of Syria had, they were outnumbered by the invisible army of God. This is still true for us today. We may feel alone, but there are more for us than there are for them. If we're willing to stand for God, God will stand behind us with everything He's got.

### **III. Willingness to Suffer.**

- A. In addition to coming from our willingness to trust and our willingness to stand, our courage in Christ also comes from our willingness to suffer. Now, this sounds weird to our ears. Why would anyone be willing to suffer? We tend to think that people who enjoy suffering are sick in the head. This is why I'm out of shape at the moment—because getting IN shape would require suffering. However, this counter-intuitive willingness to accept suffering is very much a part of the gospel. Consider Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:7-8. He's basically telling Timothy to take courage and suffer. Although we don't face the same kind of persecution Paul and Timothy did, we certainly will have to undergo hardship if we want to do what Christ wants. The essence of being a Christian is being different from the world, and the world doesn't like things that are different. Our family may shun us because we're different, people at work may avoid us because we're different, and people who used to be our friends may have nothing to say to us because we're different. That's all part of it.
- B. As Christians, we should be willing to go through this because of what's waiting for us after we're through suffering. Look at what Peter says in 1 Peter 5:9-10. He tells us that after our "little" while of suffering (and even if we suffer our whole lives, it's still a little while), God will give it all back to us. Sometimes, we have to give a lot here, but I guarantee that nobody who makes it to heaven will ever feel cheated.

### **IV. Willingness to Fail.**

- A. Finally, though, the last component of our courage must be willingness to fail. This sounds awkward. A lot of the time, we don't even like to talk about our efforts to serve Christ that don't work out as failure. The language we use, though, doesn't change the way we feel when we try to talk to someone about Jesus and get rejected, or try to stand up for what's right and get ignored. It's unpleasant, but it's reality. Even Jesus' instructions to his first disciples in Luke 10:10-11 reflect this. Much of the time, perhaps even most of the time, people aren't going to react to us as we would like. We need to accept this and make the effort anyway.
- B. Here's why: Certainly, there are times in our service to Christ when our efforts will fail. But if we keep at it, there will also be times when they don't. There are going to be times when someone does listen, and those are the people we're looking for. Consider God's words to Paul in Acts 18:9-10. This is an amazing passage. Corinth was one of the wickedest cities of the ancient world. It was the Las Vegas of its day. It was Sin City. But even in Sin City, God tells Paul that there are a lot of folks who are just waiting to hear the gospel and obey. Friends, if there were people who would listen to God in first-century Corinth, there are also going to be people who will listen in twenty-first-century Chicago. It's up to us to find them. On at least one level, evangelism is a numbers game. Evangelism is bringing the gospel to as many people as possible to find the few who will listen. We have to recognize that and not become discouraged by the people who don't listen.
- C. A couple years ago, I was pretty down in the dumps about evangelism. I'd had studies going on with a couple of people, but they all petered out. One day over lunch, I shared my frustrations with one of the elders at Dowlen Road and described my fears that I was no good at evangelism. He replied, "So you've tried to reach a hundred different people, and none of them have listened?" I said, "No; only a couple." His answer was, "Then you can't possibly know whether you're good at evangelism or not. You just might not have tried the right people yet." Friends, for all of you who feel like you're no good at evangelism, let me offer the same encouragement to you. You just might not have tried the right people yet. Let's all try together. Let's be willing to endure failure sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, so that we can find ultimate success.

**Conclusion.** Coming to God takes courage too. Why don't you gather yours and come to Him today