

A Tactical Belief Book



TAKE COURAGE!

The Vital Quality Every
Christian *Must* Have

R. Herbert

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Christian *Must* Have**

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS COURAGE?

We live in an age when courage is seldom found and often unappreciated or even scorned when it is seen. Men and women seek to avoid what is difficult, and society attempts to render the idea of courage meaningless or “toxic” in a great many areas. The need for courage to stand up for what is right, for example, has been replaced by the false idea that anything and everything is right if it makes us happy and should not be questioned by others.

But in the increasingly confused and unhappy world in which we live, courage becomes ever more needful. As poet Maya Angelou has written “Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.” The need for courage is especially true for Christians, who increasingly suffer ridicule or outright persecution for their faith. Our brothers and sisters in developing nations have experienced this – and far worse – for years, and even in Western nations where the idea of Christian persecution would have seemed impossible only a few years ago, Christianity is now considered a social evil by many, and Christians now commonly suffer active rejection and abuse. Wherever we live, we live in an age when courage is increasingly important and necessary if we are to hold to our faith and help others.

Yet in the courage-rejecting world in which we live today, it is not always easy to know exactly what true courage is. Courage is certainly not the kind of brash or even foolhardy bravado that some people seem to exhibit naturally, and which is often no more than a willingness to take chances. An act or decision of real courage is made with the full understanding that the results may well be painful. The pain may be physical, as in times of war or persecution, or the pain may be mental, as in situations of unpleasant confrontation and controversy.

Courage is also not the absence of fear, and it is certainly not wrong to be afraid; it is only wrong to let fear guide our lives and make our decisions. On the other hand, courage often involves acting in the face of fear – being afraid to do something but doing it anyway. As we will see in this book, the Bible shows that Jesus specifically commanded his disciples and followers to exhibit courage in many areas of their lives. The following chapters will show you why and how.

1. WHY EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS COURAGE

Have you ever noticed in the book of Revelation – the Bible’s final summary book – that the “cowardly” top the list of the unrepentant who will not be given eternal life (Revelation 21:8)? Considering that Revelation’s “Hall of Shame” list includes murderers, idolators, and others guilty of the most serious sins, the fact that cowardice – the opposite of courage – is mentioned first should give us pause.

The Bible praises courage frequently and contains many stories of courage in action. Some of these stories, such as the account of the young David fighting the giant Goliath, come quickly to mind. But there are dozens more examples throughout the pages of Scripture where individuals stepped forward and fought against huge odds or persisted in difficult situations – often alone and without the support of others. There are individual lessons we should not miss in these stories, but they all show courage to be a hallmark of those who truly follow God. There are numerous reasons why we must have courage if we are to please God. In this chapter we will look at some of those reasons in order to see why courage is so important for the Christian.

Courage Is Commanded

First, we must understand that to have courage is not just a biblical suggestion; it is a biblical command. We may be familiar with some of the many inspiring Old Testament verses such as “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified ... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). We may also be aware of the multiple times God commanded leaders such as Joshua to be courageous (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9, etc.) – but we don’t always notice examples in the New Testament that apply directly to us today.

If we look carefully, we find Jesus not only commanded courage of his disciples when they feared: “Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage!”” (Matthew 14:27 and see also Mark 6:50), but we also find him reminding his servants to have courage relative to the work he gave them to do: “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”” (Acts 23:11).

The apostle Paul clearly obeyed that command to take courage (Philippians 1:20; etc.) and passed the instruction along to the Christians he taught: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; *be courageous*; be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13). There is no question that courage is commanded of the followers of Christ as much as it was of God’s servants in Old Testament times.

Courage Is Change-Producing

One of the big reasons that we are urged to have courage in our personal lives and in doing the work we are given to do is that courage is so often needed to confront and withstand evil and wrongdoing – to resist what is wrong both in our own lives and in society around us.

This is not to say, of course, that Christians are called to be caped crusaders who roam around courageously fighting evil at every turn – but that courage is so often needed to resist evil and wrongdoing when it does appear in ourselves and in others. Sometimes it takes courage to simply admit our own problems and failings, and often it takes courage to overcome the desire to not “rock the boat” by taking on problems around us that we could do something about – especially when we feel we are alone in carrying on the fight. Without courage there is always the danger that we will not change as we need to do so, or fight battles that need to be fought.

You have probably heard the so-called Serenity Prayer: “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” While this is true to a point, the Christian life to which we are called is full of admonitions such as “fight,” “defend,” “seek,” and “resist” that require courage as well as work. Courage is often needed in order not to consider a problem as something we “cannot change.”

There are plenty of biblical examples of this natural human tendency to run away from things that require change – one need only think of the apostle Peter who, when he was called by Jesus exclaimed “Oh, Lord, please leave me – I’m too much of a sinner to be around you” to which Jesus replied, “Don’t be afraid” (Luke 5:8, 10 NLT). Jesus’ reply was instructive for all of us because he understood that we are often held back by our fear and need courage both to change and to accept God’s calling when it is given to us.

Courage Is Contagious

It also helps us to understand the importance of courage when we realize that there is not a single instance among the dozens of accounts of physical and spiritual bravery found in the Bible where one person's courage did not have an emboldening effect on others.

We find many Old Testament examples of this – such as the story of King Saul's son Jonathan demonstrating courage that inspired the young man's armor bearer to join him in a daring military raid against heavy odds (1 Samuel 14:1-13). Numerous other examples in the Hebrew Scriptures show people being inspired by a courageous action. Such was the case with the disheartened Israelites after David slew Goliath (1 Samuel 17:52). Conversely, when a leader loses courage, so – in a startling domino effect – do the people, as was the case when Saul's son Ish-Bosheth became fearful (2 Samuel 4:1).

There are also a good number of fascinating examples of the contagious nature of courage in the New Testament. Take the case of Joseph of Arimathea who bravely asked Pilate for the body of Jesus in order to give him a proper burial. The Gospel of Mark tells us that “Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, *took courage* and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” (Mark 15:43 ESV).

This was no small act of bravery, as Jesus had just been executed as a rebel instigating sedition against the Roman Empire – and Joseph was no natural hero. John's Gospel tells us: “... Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away” (John 19:38).

But Joseph's act of courage had immediate ripple effects. John's Gospel also tells us that “He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds [to embalm the body of Jesus]” (John 19:39). When Joseph “took courage,” he inspired Nicodemus – who had been too afraid of the Jews to talk with Jesus except under the cover of darkness – to likewise act with courage.

Biblical examples like these show that courage always has an effect – even when others are afraid to act until they see the success of someone who does demonstrate courageous behavior. Perhaps more than any other quality we may demonstrate, courage is contagious!

Courage Is Confirming

Not only is courage contagious when it is demonstrated, but also by acting courageously – even if we do not feel courageous – we confirm our faith to God, to others, and even to ourselves.

Acts of courage can be a powerful demonstration of faith that influences others in ways that we may not even guess at the time. The book of Acts tells us specifically that the Jewish priestly authorities questioned the apostles Peter and John in a threatening manner regarding their teaching, but: “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” (Acts 4:13). It was the courage of the two apostles, not their learning or eloquence, that was a witness to the Jewish priests and religious leaders. It is doubtless not a coincidence that shortly after that we are told: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, *and a large number of priests* became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

Acting with courage even helps confirm our own dedication to God and his calling. We need faith to have courage and courage to express our faith. The apostle Paul showed this when he wrote: “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20). Courageous living demonstrates our faith in right and proper ways. Put simply, we need courage in our Christian lives because courage is faith in action. Our courage and our trust in God work hand in hand.

So there are many reasons why every Christian needs courage. But having courage is not a simple decision one makes or a quality that one develops and then easily applies to any given situation. As we will see in the following chapters, it is possible to be courageous in one area yet virtually without courage in another. The same person who is fearless on the battlefield may be afraid to speak or act in public (1 Samuel 10:17-24). In the chapters of this book we will explore the different kinds of courage and we will see how, with God’s help, we can develop them all.

2. COURAGE TO BELIEVE

The story of the young Roman mother Vibia Perpetua and her servant Felicitas – who lived in the city of Carthage in North Africa around AD 200 – is one of the most inspiring in Christian history.

Although she was only twenty-two years old and was living in an anti-Christian society, Perpetua had the courage to believe when many had lost hope and she was willing to pay the ultimate price for her belief. A recent convert and a new mother, Perpetua was also well-educated and left the first known diary of a Christian woman and a firsthand account of her own experience leading up to her martyrdom.

When the Emperor Septimius Severus (AD 145-211) attempted to obliterate Christianity, which he believed undermined Roman patriotism, he focused his attention on North Africa, which had become a center of the Christian faith. Among the first to be arrested were five new converts taking classes to prepare for baptism, one of whom was Perpetua.

When Perpetua and her servant Felicitas were arrested and thrown in prison, her father came to her and begged her to renounce her faith for her own sake, for her new baby, and for her parents. Although this was a heart-wrenching situation, Perpetua famously replied, “My father ... you see this pitcher. Can we call it by any other name than what it is?” When her father replied “No,” Perpetua said “Nor can I call myself by any other name than that of Christian.”

In her diary, Perpetua tells us about the prison: “I had never known such darkness ... There was great heat because of the closeness of the air, there was cruel handling by the soldiers. Lastly I was tormented by concern for my baby.” When Christian friends bribed the prison guards to let Perpetua see her family and child, they brought her baby to her and she was able to nurse him. Concentrating not on her own situation, but that of her family, she tells us “And being concerned for [my baby], I spoke to my mother and strengthened my brother and entrusted my son to them. I was sad because I saw they pined for my sake.”

Others recorded that when she was taken to the arena where executions were performed Perpetua refused, as a Christian, to offer a sacrifice to the emperor and was duly condemned to die. Bound in nets, Perpetua and her servant were exposed to an enraged bull, which charged and tossed them for the enjoyment of the crowd. When the people had finally seen enough of the torture and the arena guards came to finish

them, the Christians kissed one another with the kiss of peace and without flinching faced the swords.

Perpetua's name in Latin means "everlasting" and that of her servant Felicitas means "happiness," and there is no doubt that these courageous women gained exactly these things beyond this life. But their story is only one of countless others that tell of individuals, families, and sometimes whole communities who, down through history, have had the courage to believe despite the cost they knew they might have to pay.

In many parts of the world today, the situation is no better, of course. Persecution of Christians and the need for the courage to believe is just as real now as it was in the days of the Roman arenas. The story of Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas, as well as many others, are linked across the centuries and around the world. In some cases, in his wisdom, God has allowed believers to be killed; in other situations he has protected them. But in every case, God made it possible for his people to have the courage to believe just as Jesus himself promised: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33 BSB).

It is the knowledge that Jesus overcame the world (Colossians 2:15) and death (2 Timothy 1:10), and that through him we may also overcome these things, that can give us the courage to believe no matter what the cost. The apostle Paul spoke of that same courage and the certainty it gives the believer when he wrote that we can believe "without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you," knowing "that you will be saved – and that by God" (Philippians 1:28). "Therefore," Paul tells us, "since we have such a hope, we are very bold" (2 Corinthians 3:12).

The Courage to Live Our Beliefs

Fortunately, in most countries today, Christians do not have to risk dying for their beliefs. But wherever we live, we still need the courage to believe in a great many areas of life. Perhaps we need this courage when we face resistance, ridicule, or rejection for our beliefs from family members, co-workers, or others, or for some other reason. It is probably true that most Christians find some need for courage to accept and maintain their beliefs at some point in their lives. That is why the Psalms tell us to "Be strong and let your heart take courage, *all you who hope in the LORD*" (Psalm 31:24 NASB, emphasis added). All who look to God need to have courage!

Of course, when we talk about the courage to believe, we mean the strength to follow through on what we believe. It takes little or no courage to simply believe what we come to see is true (James 2:19). The courage is needed to act on our beliefs – to live them. But we are given encouragement for this. If we think about it, many of the stories in the Bible are about individuals overcoming their fears and both believing and acting on what they knew was the right thing to do.

In the Old Testament, consider the story of Abraham, whom God told to leave his homeland, his people, and his family and to go to a distant land that God promised to give to him (Genesis 12:1-2). Despite the many dangers of this journey, Abraham went (Hebrews 11:8). And when God later tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, Abraham obeyed again (Genesis 22:1-19). But Abraham's obedience was based on his belief – he believed that God would give him the land he promised, and that God would resurrect Isaac if necessary. As the apostle James tells us, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22). In other words, through courage, Abraham's belief was put into action.

We find another example of the courage to live what we believe in the talented young Jewish captive Daniel who rose to an important level in the government of the Persian king Cyrus. When other government officials jealously tried to destroy him by outlawing prayer to all but the king, we are told that: "when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:6-10). You already know the rest of this story – how Daniel was protected in the den of lions and was restored by Cyrus (Daniel 6:13-28). Daniel obviously had the courage to live by his beliefs in these trying circumstances – and to do so openly.

We are told of individuals who grew in this kind of courage. The story of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who buried Jesus after his crucifixion, that we looked at briefly in the last chapter is a great example. All four gospels record that story, but each gospel gives only a part of the picture. Matthew 27:57 tells us that Joseph was a rich man who came to believe in Jesus. Mark 15:43 records that Joseph was also a member of the Sanhedrin Council that tried Jesus. Luke 23:51-53 adds that Joseph "had not consented to their decision and action" in condemning Jesus and continues to tell us that Joseph "went to Pilate to ask for the body of

Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and placed it in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had yet been laid.” Matthew’s Gospel (27:60) notes that this was Joseph’s own tomb that he had prepared for himself. But John 19:38 adds a crucial detail to this story – that although he was a disciple of Jesus, Joseph had believed, but “secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders.”

Although Joseph had been afraid to publicly acknowledge his belief during Jesus’ ministry, yet with Jesus’ death Joseph found the courage not only to override the desire to fit in with his colleagues and friends among his own people, but also to ask the Roman governor Pilate for the body of someone the Romans had executed as a rebel and an enemy of the emperor. As we saw, Joseph’s courage also inspired Nicodemus – another individual who had been a secret believer in Jesus – to act openly on his belief (John 19:39-40). It is a story that can encourage us, also. Even if we have a track record of not being particularly brave, believers like Joseph of Arimathea show us that we too can find and take courage if we find the right motivation.

The Source of Courageous Belief

But what is the source of the kind of courage displayed by so many heroes of the faith both in biblical times and beyond? The Bible does not tell us directly, but through careful reading of the accounts, looking at what is recorded of these people, and seeing what the Bible tells us elsewhere, it is not difficult to answer this question. The key to courageous belief is simply the desire to obey God. This was clearly a powerful factor for Abraham and for Daniel. Both had been told God’s will – Abraham directly and Daniel through the Mosaic law – and there is a connection between belief and obedience. The great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer perceptively noted this when he said that because someone would not obey, he could not believe. At some level what we do not obey we do not believe, and of course, this works both ways: what we do not believe, we do not obey.

The good news is that obedience to God requires belief and courage, but it also *builds* belief and courage! We see this in something God told Joshua: “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 1:7). We need to be courageous to obey, but when we do obey, we find successes that give us

further confidence. The courageous deeds of Abraham and Daniel did not occur in a vacuum – they came after ongoing obedience and growth of the desire to obey God. That is not to say that the desire was entirely their own; they may have been helped in this by God.

Physically and humanly, we can have a certain desire for obedience to God, but God gives the desire to us in a purer form and to a much greater degree. In the Psalms, we see David asking God for exactly this: “Give me an eagerness for your laws ” (Psalm 119:36 NLT), and the apostle Paul tells us “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). The New Living Translation makes this a little clearer: “For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” In other words, God gives us the desire and the courage to act on what we believe – we need only ask him and then trust him.

Such was the confidence of Vibia Perpetua. On the morning of the day of her execution, she wrote the last entry in her diary: “And I awoke, and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that the victory would be mine.” If we, like Perpetua, have a great enough desire to obey God, he gives us the courage to do so. Our obedience brings the encouragement and strength of the Spirit of God.

3. COURAGE TO BE DIFFERENT

In 1987 a Southern Baptist missionary working in the Philippines prayed for a son who would become a preacher. As is so often the case, God answered the prayer, though not perhaps in the way it would be expected. While his wife was pregnant, she was given medications that caused a severe placental abruption. Doctors expected a stillbirth and recommended an abortion, which the parents declined. When he was born, they named the child Timothy Richard, the first name after the apostle Paul's famous assistant. Eventually, however, the world would come to learn the young man's name as simply Tim: Tim Tebow. Today, as for much of the past decade, people have strong feelings about Tebow – either loving him or hating him – but there is no doubt that in actions and in words he has proclaimed the word of God in ways that have sometimes far outreached the effectiveness of even many great preachers.

The young Tebow played football and played it well. While at the University of Florida, he set records and won the celebrated Heisman Trophy. Selected by the Denver Broncos in the first round of the 2010 National Football League draft, Tebow led them to their first significant victories in a number of years. But Tim also began to acknowledge his Christian faith in unprecedented ways. Becoming famous for dropping to a knee on the football field to pray after touchdowns, he became a cultural phenomenon, and his style of praying became known as “Tebowing.” Many attacked him for this open display of his beliefs, though it is interesting that many of those who attacked him now warmly support the players who have recently taken to kneeling before games to reject the national anthem and to make political statements.

Tebow also caused a stir by thanking God for his team's successes in post-game news interviews and by writing scripture references such as John 3:16 in his football cheekbone black – references that were seen and discussed by millions of football fans and TV viewers. This too was widely attacked as a “Christian antic,” though it is doubtless true that millions more people now know what John 3:16 says than would have otherwise. The attacks on Tebow were relentless, however, and he was eventually traded to a lesser position in another team and left football to pursue a minor league baseball career with the New York Mets from 2016 to 2021. During his entire career, Tebow has continued to use his name recognition to preach the word in many ways. He started a charitable

foundation and has co-written several books about his life and career in which he frequently speaks of Jesus Christ and the good that comes from living for him.

While his on-field actions remain vigorously disputed, there is no doubt that Tim Tebow dared to be different. Even when he experienced widespread anger and rejection for his display of his Christian faith, he courageously continued, and we can learn much from him. Tim stands some six feet four inches tall and is an imposing figure but he is known for his humility. While he has been criticized for “pushing his faith on people,” those who know Tim know that he is always polite and uses his gift for preaching Christ naturally, in context, and without sounding “preachy.” He also uses the pulpit of his life carefully – speaking more about what he is for than what he is against.

Perhaps you or I may not be as comfortable acting in ways that make us stand out from the crowd as much as Tim Tebow has gladly and continually done. But even if we do not feel led to stand out to such a degree, Tim’s life challenges us to ask ourselves “Do we need to be different as believers?” and if so, “To what degree do we have the courage to stand out from the world around us?” These are questions all Christians should ask themselves.

Being Different in the Old Testament

If we read the stories of the Old Testament carefully, we see that almost all the leading figures of the Hebrew Bible were individuals who stood out and were different from those around them. We need only read the stories of Noah, Lot, Abraham, Daniel, and others to see that precisely because these people were willing to be different, they were chosen and used by God. But it is often hard to relate our own situations to those of biblical heroes who may seem more full of faith and almost larger than life to us. Though we need not think that way, it is sometimes helpful to look instead at “ordinary” people more like ourselves. To do this, we need only look at the nation of ancient Israel.

When God called Israel out of slavery in Egypt he told them “you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 14:2). Notice the people of Israel were to be “holy to ...God” because they were called “out of all the peoples.” That meant they were to be separate and different. The King James Bible translates the

latter part of this verse as “to be a peculiar people.” Although “treasured possession” is a better translation, the underlying Hebrew does connote a people who were to be “special,” “unique,” “set apart,” or “different.”

The people of Israel were called to become a nation separate from the world around them – not just in living in their own separate territory, but also separate in being different from the rest of the world. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were called to dress, eat, work, rest, speak and even think differently – to live in ways that would make them separate and thus signify that they were God’s people who represented God’s ways to others (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Sadly, the Old and New Testaments show that the Israelites repeatedly failed in this calling (Psalm 78:10–11; Romans 2:17–24), but the Bible also gives some wonderfully encouraging examples of when they succeeded.

Being Different in the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same emphasis on those who were willing to be different being called and used by God. Jesus himself continually exemplified the willingness to be different in the area of religion – which was central to Jewish culture of the time. Jesus called a different type of disciple from those chosen by the established teachers of his day. That is why we read that even the followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14). “Why do you ...” and “Why do your disciples ...” are in fact the questions most frequently asked of Jesus. People could see that his and his disciples’ actions and beliefs were different and challenged him regarding this fact continually.

Toward the end of his life, Jesus stressed the importance of being called out of the world, of being different, to his disciples: “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:19). In saying this, Jesus showed that being different often comes with a price, but we should keep in mind, of course, the infinitely greater value of being chosen to serve God’s purposes.

The apostle Peter emphasized this fact when he wrote: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). It is interesting to note that in saying we are to be a “holy nation,” the Greek root of the word Peter used

for “holy” is the same as the root word for being different or set apart. What Peter wrote about being a chosen people and a holy nation, is, of course, exactly what was said by God to ancient Israel (Exodus 19:6). But under the New Testament every Christian has the opportunity to be part of a holy nation of people that God is forming – a kingdom of those who are not afraid to be different.

Being Different Today

As we have seen, throughout the Bible we find God desiring to work in and through those who are willing to be set apart even when this comes at a price. This is where the courage to be different comes into play. But we are called to be different from other people in a positive and influencing manner. Although we are never called to be separated from the people of the world, we are directly called to be separated from their sin. This means separating ourselves from drugs, from the misuse of alcohol, from cheating, lying, stealing, and every other way in which God’s way of life is regularly rejected. This often takes courage – not only courage to stand up to those who chose wrong and who make themselves our enemies, but also, sometimes, courage to stand up to our friends: “Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer [do the] wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you” (1 Peter 4:4 NLT). And being truly different is not just about what we do not do. There is a kind of lack of courage that tells only the truths that are safe to tell. Martin Luther (someone whose religious courage changed the world) addressed this problem in one of his letters:

... it does not help that one of you would say: “I will gladly confess Christ and His Word on every detail, except that I may keep silent about one or two things which [some] may not tolerate ... For whoever denies Christ in one detail or word has denied the same Christ... in all the details. (Translated from *Martin Luther’s Werke : kritische Gesamtausgabe [Weimarer Ausgabe] : [3. Band] Briefwechsel.*)

If not doing certain things, or if speaking about things others do not want to hear draws attention to us, then we are being the kind of light to the world that we are called to be. King David understood this when he wrote: “I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips,

LORD, as you know. I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help. I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly” (Psalm 40:9-10).

And we must never be ashamed of our faith for any reason. Jesus himself made this clear: “Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:26).

But this does not mean that we should go to the other extreme and take an “in your face” approach to being different either, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7 ESV). Reading the gospel accounts and paying attention to how Jesus spoke to others can be a great help in this regard. Jesus was unafraid to speak out firmly, yet with tact, consideration, and kindness. We may never be as skilled at this as Jesus was, but we can and must follow him in having the courage to be different.

The early disciples knew and lived by this fact. When Peter and John were taken before the religious authorities of their day – because they stood out among the Jews, because they were different – we are told that the Jewish leaders were shocked: “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” (Acts 4:13). The authorities were not swayed by the disciples’ preaching – but they saw their courage and realized what its source was. Courage itself can be a witness to our faith.

Fortunately, we do not need to worry about how to develop this kind of courage to be different. We certainly can practice such acts of courage in small ways and build up as we go along. But if we are living and walking with God, he will give it to us as needed if we ask him. Just as Jesus promised his followers regarding difficult situations: “do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say” (Matthew 10:19), so the same is true about our need for courage. We see this in something that the Old Testament priest Ezra wrote: “Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage ...” (Ezra 7:28). That is also why the apostle Paul could tell the Philippians: “I eagerly expect ... that I will ... have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20). The courage to be different from this world is not something we must produce without help. We must simply be willing to let God give it to us and to use it when it is needed!

4. COURAGE TO CHANGE

Just over five hundred years ago, in 1517, the German priest and biblical scholar Martin Luther is said to have nailed his list of 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. It was Luther's "theses" or principles that triggered the Protestant Reformation, and in so doing changed the history of the modern world. Many of Luther's theses had to do with his rejection of the practice of selling "indulgences" in the Catholic Church of his time – a means of raising money for the church which claimed that people might pay to have the souls of loved ones or others released from "purgatory." The stand taken by Luther on this issue alone was a remarkable one, considering the degree of change Luther was demanding.

Luther also argued for a different understanding of what the Christian gospel was and what we must do to be saved. While we may think of these things as theological questions to be peacefully debated, in Luther's sixteenth-century society they were veritably seismic issues – calls for change on a magnitude not seen since the origin of Christianity itself.

The change Luther asked for eventually took hold and transformed much of Christianity, but for years Luther endured great hostility from fellow Christians, and he and his family suffered a great deal of resultant hardship. Yet Luther's personal willingness – and courage – to change even the most entrenched faulty religious ideas led to a deeper understanding of the gospel for millions of people in his own age and beyond. The Latin motto of the Reformation that Luther began was *Post tenebras lux*, that is, "After darkness, light," but it could just as well have been "After darkness, change."

Not only institutional but also individual change lay at the heart of Luther's teaching. In his very first thesis – which formed the basis of those that followed – Luther (citing Matthew 4:17) wrote: "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said, 'Repent', willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." This statement was a remarkable one for its time. The Vulgate – the Latin version of the Bible used by the Catholic Church at that time – translated the command to repent in Matthew 4:17 with the words *paenitentiam agite*, meaning "Go, and do penance." But Luther found that in the Greek text of the New Testament the word for repentance used by the New Testament writers was *metanoia*, which does not suggest penance, but means to change one's heart and mind – to be

changed or converted. This deeper and more accurate understanding of the concept of repentance had a direct impact on Luther's teaching. The truth that Luther had learned and that had lain unrecognized in the Bible for many years was that the Christian life is based on ongoing repentance and change. Perhaps it was not coincidental that Luther, an individual more accepting and desirous of change to what is right than most, came to see this. As with all of us, Luther was not perfect as an individual. Historians claim that he was guilty of anti-Semitism and other problems in the course of his life, but the degree of Luther's willingness to change himself and to strive for change in society was a strength that few of us can match.

The Christian Life Is One of Change

In reclaiming the concept of ongoing repentance, Luther found something that every Christian must also discover and act on: that true repentance is not just an inaugural event in our Christian lives, but also the very basis of our life in Christ from that time forward. Certainly, the Bible speaks of a primary repentance when we first turn to God from our own sinfulness (Acts 2:38; 11:18), and we might call that the pivotal *moment* of repentance. But the Scriptures also show that our initial repentance is followed by an ongoing *process* of repentance that is the continual mindset of the Christian. This does not mean constantly dwelling on our mistakes and failures, but continually repenting and being willing to change whenever we do find we have fallen short of God's way.

We see this ongoing or additional repentance throughout the Bible. We see it frequently, for example, in the psalms of David where he expresses repentance on many occasions. We see it in the New Testament in scriptures such as Revelation 2:5 which commands members of the church to repent of errors into which they have fallen, and in 1 John 1:8-9 which tells us that: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." This is the ongoing reality that the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him" (Colossians 2:6). Just as we begin our Christian lives with repentance and faith, so Paul says, we must continue.

We know that it is God who leads us to initial repentance (Romans 2:4), and as he continues to work with us through his indwelling Spirit (1

Corinthians 3:16), we are continually guided to repentance from ongoing mistakes and sins. The Scriptures are clear that this ongoing repentance is not done to try to earn salvation, but as a natural result of salvation occurring in our lives and our desire to become more and more like God. In other words, we are forgiven our sins through the occurrence of repentance at the beginning of our Christian lives – but we continue to ask God to forgive us and spare us from the consequences of our sins after that point. Every small repentance along the way reaffirms our original turning to God.

This concept of ongoing lifelong repentance is not a message that is heard in many churches, but it is a biblical message that we need to nail firmly to the doors of our hearts and minds.

Change Requires Courage

But even if we accept the need to change in an ongoing manner, the actual practice of this on a day-to-day basis is not always simple. Humanly we all resist change to some degree. It has been said that we change our clothes, our cars, and even our homes and jobs without much difficulty, but the hardest thing for most people is to change our minds – to change how we think and act. Intellectual change is harder than physical change, and spiritual change can be harder than either. This is both because we often tend to justify our own behavior to ourselves, and because it can take courage to change. In one sense, change is a kind of sacrifice – it is willingness to sacrifice what we are for something better. As such, meaningful change almost always requires courage. That is why the famous prayer quoted elsewhere in this book states “God grant me the ... courage to change the things I can.”

Psychologists know it can take courage for people to change because in doing so we are essentially developing a new identity, and the Christian would agree that this is exactly what is happening. Notice what Paul says about this: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24). But that is something to welcome rather than something to fear!

We can also fear change simply because of the deep-seated fear of failure that many of us have. Failure is, after all, a real aspect of life.

Sociologists and organizational psychology experts assert that as much as seventy percent of attempted organizational change fails, and the rate of failure for individuals who attempt to change through their own willpower is also relatively high. Patterns of thought and behavior are extremely durable – it often takes time and perseverance to achieve deep and lasting change. But once again the Christian can rejoice that we are offered help with the change to which we are called. There are literally dozens of Bible verses confirming this – consider only one from the Old Testament and one from the New:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6 ESV)

God clearly promises to help us change if we desire to change toward him. But there are things that we must do for that kind of change to occur.

The Keys to Change

We need God's help to change as effectively and as fully as he desires, but we need to do our part in order to get that help, and that involves two things – an inner attitude and an outward activity.

The first thing we need if God is to help us change is simply an attitude of humility. Psalms 25:9 tells us, “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way” (ESV). We must have an underlying attitude of humility if we are to see and accept the change that we need. And Psalms 149:4 confirms this: “For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation” (ESV).

The other thing we need in order for God to work change in our lives is *ongoing* study of the word of God. Real change occurs as we continue to receive God's instruction, commit to keeping it, and then God helps us to do so. But this requires more than briefly reading a few verses of the Bible at the end of a tiring day. We need to live in the word of God – taking study of his word seriously, both in when and how we study. This means studying in the best times we have available. It also means not simply

reading a chapter or two, but whenever possible, studying till we find something that helps us better understand God's way, or refreshes our memory of it. That is the kind of ongoing, meaningful study that continues from the initial zeal praised so highly by the Book of Acts "Now the Bereans were more noble-minded ... for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true" (Acts 17:11 BSB). Once we have studied diligently to learn the gospel message, we must continue diligently to let God fulfill his purposes within us.

We do not grow spiritually by chance, we grow spiritually by change, and a humble attitude and an ongoing quest for guidance are the two things that ensure God will help us with the understanding, the courage, and the power we need to make that change real.

5. COURAGE TO SERVE

You may have never heard the name of Irena Sendler (15 February 1910 – 12 May 2008), but hers is a name that deserves to live on and one that you should know. Born Irena Krzyżanowska, Irena Sendler was a social worker who secretly served in the Polish Underground in Nazi-occupied Warsaw during World War II.

While continuing her normal everyday work for the Department of Social Welfare in Warsaw, Sendler also worked under the cover-name “Jolanta” and was responsible for helping to smuggle a great many Jewish children out of the beleaguered Warsaw Ghetto. The ghetto was an area about the size of New York’s Central Park that the Nazis established in 1940 and forced some 450,000 Jewish people to live cordoned off in this area. By getting hundreds of Jewish children out of the ghetto, then helping provide them with false identity documents and finding shelter for them with Polish families, orphanages, and other facilities such as Catholic convents, Sendler unquestionably saved the lives of those children and protected them from the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust.

Sendler was not alone in this activity, of course. She was one of dozens of Christian and humanitarian workers who participated in the effort to save the Jewish children, but what places Sendler apart from this group is the fact that she functioned as the “point woman” in the operation – single handedly getting the children out of the doomed ghetto.

The courage of this woman is evident in the incredible ways in which she performed the extractions. In addition to taking the children out of the guarded ghetto by means of sewers and other hidden routes, Sendler utilized methods such as hiding a child under a blanket in an ambulance or hiding a child in a suitcase, a sack, or other container of some kind. She made a hidden compartment in a wheeled toolbox that she took in and out of the ghetto, and very small children and babies were smuggled out in that. The rescue of very small children was especially dangerous as they often began to cry. Incredibly, Sendler trained a pet dog that accompanied her to bark in order to cover the sound whenever a hidden child began to cry.

Using covert methods like these, Sendler was able to rescue some 2,500 children from very likely death. But the Nazis became suspicious of her activities, and in 1943 she was arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo. During the questioning she was tortured and beaten so badly

that both her legs and feet were fractured. Sendler's courage came into play once again, however, and she did not reveal the names of her contacts and fellow underground workers.

Nevertheless, someone had informed on her, and Sendler was sentenced to death. But in yet another amazing aspect of this story, the Polish resistance movement managed to bribe the individual assigned to execute her, and she was spirited away on the day of her scheduled execution. On the following day, the German occupation forces publicly proclaimed her execution and Irena Sendler, in hiding, had the satisfaction of reading the posters that were put up with the news that she had been shot.

Almost all the parents of the children that Sendler saved died at the Treblinka concentration camp, but due to her efforts those people knew, at least, that their children were safe. Not surprisingly, after the war, in 1946, Sendler was awarded the Gold Cross of Merit for her work in saving so many Jewish children; sometime later she was also awarded the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest civilian honor. In 1965, Sendler was also recognized by the State of Israel as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations."

The good that Irena Sendler accomplished must always be seen in the light of the amazing courage that this woman displayed throughout hundreds of missions in which children were saved and in undergoing torture rather than betraying her fellow workers. While many at that time felt the Nazi treatment of Jews and others was wrong, far fewer had the courage to step in and serve – to actively do something about the problem.

Serving Others Often Needs Courage

Irena Sendler's story is unique in many ways, but it is also true that those who serve others often find that it takes courage to do so. We need only think of firefighters and other first-responders, or of the doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers who go into areas where deadly illnesses are present, or who work with the sick and those needing help in times of crisis such as that caused by the Covid-19 virus or other diseases.

But courage is often equally needed to serve God and to help others in spiritual ways. This fact is highlighted in the words of God spoken by the prophet Haggai when the Jews who had returned from captivity in Babylon were afraid to serve in order to rebuild the Temple to God: "But

now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2:4). Being "strong" in these circumstances did not mean being physically strong enough for the work of building, but having the mental strength of courage to do the needed work despite opposition.

Sometimes the resistance against doing good may even come from seemingly religious people, and this can also require courage. Jesus often experienced this, but had the courage to heal and help those in need even when the religious authorities disapproved and tried to kill him for it (Mark 3:4-6).

Courage is needed no less in our own age by those who serve by carrying the word of God to areas where it is officially discouraged or forbidden, fighting against the evils of abortion, pornography, sex trafficking, and other social ills, as well as in lesser but still very real ways where speaking the truth is increasingly frowned upon and resisted by democratic societies that supposedly value freedom of speech.

Fortunately, as we will see repeatedly in this book, the courage needed to help others spiritually is not some kind of strength that we must work up. Spiritual courage is an attribute of the Spirit of God. That is why the book of Acts tells us that at the inception of the New Testament church, the disciples "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31 CSB). We will have the courage to serve the spiritual needs of others if the Spirit of God is in us and regularly stirred up, just as Paul told Timothy: "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

The Spirit of God can give us the courage we need in even the most challenging situations. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome and speaking the gospel was becoming increasingly dangerous, he remarked how God nevertheless gave the courage needed. "Most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Philippians 1:14 NASB). "Trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment" means the brethren were praying for God's help because of the dangers that existed – and they were thus being given the courage they needed. Just as God gives us his power when we are weak, and his love to deal with those who seem unlovable, so he gives us courage when we need it in order to serve.

Serving Is Sacrifice

Ultimately, of course, even with God-given courage, we may still suffer for serving others. The truth is that service is often based on sacrifice, and it is probably true to say that we cannot serve others without giving up something of or for ourselves. But that is the calling we are given: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In our own everyday lives most of us do not need to sacrifice to such an extent, but we should always ask for and use the courage to serve – even if it is simply to take on more than we might feel comfortable with or to give even more generously of our time.

The apostle Paul’s farewell to the Christians in Ephesus reminds us that without the sacrifice of work it is difficult to truly serve: “You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak” (Acts 20:34-35).

But if we utilize the courage to serve, we will have the strength we need to help others. The two qualities of strength and courage cannot be separated, as 2 Samuel plainly shows: “Be strong, and let us show ourselves courageous for the sake of our people and for the cities of our God; and may the LORD do what is good in his sight” (2 Samuel 10:12 NASB). We utilize the strength of courage out of love and not for reward, of course, but 2 Chronicles 15:7 reminds us nonetheless to “be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded.”

6. COURAGE TO STRUGGLE

The story of Eun Hye is about one of many believers who have found courage while living in repressive and anti-Christian cultures. Eun Hye is not her real name, which has been kept secret by the Christian organizations that have helped her, in order to protect her and her North Korean relatives. When Eun Hye's parents travelled to China several years ago to try to find two of their daughters who were missing, Eun Hye ended up in a crowded official "camp" for street children where conditions were abysmal. Forced to learn to hunt rats (which were plentiful), the sixteen-year-old was barely able to survive and began to pray to "Hananim," the invisible God her grandmother had told her about.

As reported by Open Doors and other organizations that have worked with her, one day the camp guards sought detainees for work in the mountains and Eun Hye heard a voice in her head urging her to volunteer. She did so and while in the mountains she and another girl were left alone just long enough to escape. After an arduous journey – without supplies – struggling through mountains, swimming across a reservoir, and tunneling under an embankment with their bare hands, Eun Hye finally reached her hometown where she was reunited with her family. Her father had become a Christian and explained to her who the God Hananim was. Soon after, the family swam across a border river and escaped to China where they were able to join an underground church.

But the group was betrayed, and Eun Hye and her family were arrested and transported back to a detention center in North Korea. There, Eun Hye suffered frostbite, and her parents were brutally interrogated, yet miraculously, the family was released and was able to return to their home. But the struggle to survive, especially as Christians, was ongoing.

Eventually, as the family did not have enough food for everyone, Eun Hye and her mother again swam across the river into China, somehow surviving as the North Korean guards fired at them. Eun Hye was able to settle in China though she was in continued danger of betrayal and miraculously escaped several attempts to capture her. At one point the truck sent to take her back to North Korea broke down and she was released. Her father eventually died from his interrogation injuries, and Eun Hye's brother remains trapped in North Korea, but she married in China and was able to flee with her husband to South Korea where she lives today.

Eun Hye's story is an inspiring one, and it is a wonderful example of someone who did not accept the restrictive and God-denying society she found herself in, but was willing to struggle with everything she had to change her situation. As Christians, we may or may not find ourselves in circumstances that are intolerable, but we all have to struggle with issues in our everyday lives, and we may also be moved to struggle on behalf of others, in prayer (Colossians 4:12 ESV) and other ways.

Every Life Has its Struggles

Ultimately, there is little difference between someone like Eun Hye struggling against an oppressive and atheistic regime and someone struggling with an addiction or enslaving sin or perhaps with debilitating health issues, poverty, or other significant problems in their lives. "Is not all human life a struggle?" Job asked (Job 7:1 NLT).

However, Christians often experience more struggles than those around them, as they fight spiritual battles as well as physical ones. This level of struggle can be daunting, and sometimes Christians become discouraged because they feel they are not succeeding as much as they would like – or should. But it can be encouraging to remember that God does not expect us to maintain a perfect track record in this life. He does not expect us to win every battle – but he does expect us to fight every one! It is our willingness to struggle and fight in order to please and obey God that he wants to see.

And only those who strive make progress, only those who struggle succeed. That is why Jesus said "*Strive* to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24 ESV). Likewise, the apostle Paul urged the followers of Jesus: "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Timothy 6:11-12). "Pursue," "fight," "take hold" – these expressions all reflect the struggles of the Christian life. And in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul also describes this spiritual battle: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12).

In this verse, and in others where he speaks of fighting, Paul is primarily talking about the struggle of the individual Christian with his or her own self – the struggle to repress our human nature and to let God's nature work through us. The word he used that is translated "struggle" in

many of our Bibles was originally one used to describe a wrestling match or hand-to-hand physical combat. That is why Paul tells us to utilize the full armor of God for this struggle (Ephesians 6:11) and goes on to describe it in detail (vss. 14-17).

In addition to the analogy of spiritual battle and the armor we need to fight it, Paul also uses another metaphor in his letters that helps us to understand the Christian struggle – that of the runner. For example, to the Corinthian church he wrote: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24). That is also the analogy behind Paul’s famous words “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me” (Philippians 3:13–14).

With this running analogy Paul speaks not only of our struggles with ourselves, but also our struggles to do the work God gives us to do (see also Colossians 2:1).

The Joy of Struggling?

But we should not think of this spiritual “running” as short-distance sprinting. We are called to a long-distance run, and that is where the analogy can be encouraging. In long-distance running even those who occasionally stumble and fall can persist and still win the race. And there is another aspect of running that can be encouraging to us.

In long-distance races, after the runner has warmed up and worked through the initial pain of intense exertion, the struggle actually gets easier after a few miles. Runners often experience a sense of exhilaration and euphoria that is called the “runner’s high.” This occurs when the struggle the body is experiencing results in the production of endorphins – the chemicals produced by the body to relieve stress and pain.

That is not unlike the situation we can experience as we struggle to run the spiritual race of life. All too often we consider the battles we face in life as negatives to be endured and survived, but if we allow God to work in us as we run the race, knowing that he is accomplishing something through our struggles, we begin to see them differently – as opportunities rather than liabilities or disabilities. That is the attitude of Jesus who, in facing even the greatest struggle of his life “For the joy set before him ... endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

Of course, the joy we can find in struggle and suffering is not just for ourselves. As Christians we struggle on behalf of others also. Paul emphasized this in his letter to the Philippians: “We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it” (Philippians 1:30 NLT). He also wrote to the Romans: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me” (Romans 15:30).

In addition to struggling in our own battles and those of fellow believers, Christians can choose to struggle in many outward ways – for example, to help right injustice, to stop the spread of social evils such as drugs and pornography, to help the weak and those in need, to fight to curb abortion, child abuse and human trafficking, and not least to preach the gospel (Ephesians 6:15).

If God is working through us in these things we will know, even despite setbacks and temporary losses or delays, the joy that comes through running the spiritual race. As Isaiah wrote, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’” (Isaiah 52:7 ESV). In this verse, the feet of the one who brings good news are the feet of the runner, and as Paul confirms “This is why we work hard and continue to struggle, for our hope is in the living God, who is the Savior of all people and particularly of all believers” (1 Timothy 4:10 NLT).

Relying on God and Doing Our Part

As we remarked earlier in this chapter, every life has its struggles – and every struggle requires courage. This is doubtless why the Bible records numerous stories of individuals who took courage, fought, and overcame difficulties – stories that can inspire and encourage us whatever our circumstances or the battles we fight. In most of these stories the victory was not achieved on purely human strength, however – it was a combination of human effort and divine assistance. As Paul told the Colossians: “That’s why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ’s mighty power that works within me” (Colossians 1:29 NLT). God’s power works within us as we do our part.

It may seem like a contradiction that God helps us but we must also fight our own battles. Nevertheless, God expects us to do everything we

can as well as trusting him. We may be familiar with scriptures such as Nehemiah 4:9 which tells us “we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat,” but we can find this principle again and again in the stories the Bible records. In almost every instance where bravery is commanded of people, we see both a call to an inner courageous mindset and outward action on our part – it is this combination of our *attitude* and our *action* that God strengthens and assists. Notice just a few examples of exactly this principle, from both the Old and New Testaments:

Moses to Joshua: “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their ancestors to give them” (Deuteronomy 31:7).

David to Solomon: “Be strong and courageous and do the work” (1 Chronicles 28:20).

The crowd to the blind man: “Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you” (Mark 10:49 NASB).

Jesus to Paul: “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (Acts 23:11)

In all these cases the individuals did their part, and God then did the rest – whether fighting personal battles or in efforts to help others. It is the reason behind the famous words of the great preacher John Wesley, who said, “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.” It is that kind of dedicated willingness to struggle, to fight, that leads eventually to the certain victory God promises. We may sometimes have to wait for God’s help in our struggles, but God will always answer – as the Psalms remind us: “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!” (Psalm 31:24 ESV). But always we must have courage: “Be strong and courageous . . . with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.” (2 Chronicles 32:7–8).

7. COURAGE TO CONTINUE

On September 11, 2001, Brian Birdwell, a lieutenant colonel in the United States military, was at work in the Pentagon building. Without any warning he was suddenly knocked off his feet and the world went dark around him.

The next thing he knew, Birdwell became conscious of the overpowering smell and taste of jet fuel, and he realized that he was on fire. Struggling, he managed to crawl for some distance until he collapsed under one of the fire sprinklers in the corridor he was in and was eventually found and rushed to emergency medical treatment.

There it became clear that Birdwell was burned over sixty percent of his body surface and his lungs were also badly damaged. Burns are among the most painful and difficult to heal injuries we can experience, which is what makes this and similar cases so meaningful. It would take some forty surgeries and long months and years of healing to get him back to anywhere near normal life.

Colonel Birdwell was one of many service people and civilians who were badly injured in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and his story was carefully researched and told by writer Donna St. George in a moving *Washington Post* article. She shows how Birdwell felt he did not suffer the kind of emotional and psychological fallout with which many survivors have struggled, perhaps because early in his recovery, he looked to his pastor for help. His wife and his faith, he said, are what got him through the lasting pain and seemingly endless surgeries.

Birdwell and his wife eventually founded a nonprofit organization, Face the Fire Ministries, to support critically injured burn patients and the military's wounded. He also serves in other ways. In 2010, he ran as a Republican for a Texas state Senate seat and won — and has since been reelected. Even today, he remains scarred; but he says his scars “are a reminder of the Lord’s grace.”

In their lives and injuries, Colonel Birdwell and many other burn victims exemplify the kind of courage that is needed to simply continue — to keep going when it would be so much easier to give up. Many of these burn victims were influenced and helped by their Christian faith and have used the courage to endure in order not only to be able to continue themselves, but also to continue to serve and help others.

The Courage to Continue

Although the experiences of burn victims may be unique in many ways, they are doubtless the same in others. Many experience times when they simply feel they do not have the strength to continue. But that is precisely when the courage to continue has its greatest effect. A couple of centuries before our time, another military man – the French general Napoléon Bonaparte – is reported to have said “Courage isn’t having the strength to go on – it is going on when you don’t have strength.”

To put it another way, endurance is long-term courage. In our own Christian lives the courage to continue may mean continuing when sickness, injury, poverty, persecution, pain, depression, or some other serious problem wears us down and we find it hard to go on. Thankfully, we have hope in such situations, but so many do not have that help. In the world around us, the decreasing level of faith – and the resulting lack of hope – has caused a spiraling increase in suicides in recent years. Not only those who have experienced terrible traumas commit suicide, but also in an age when most never learn the meaning of the courage to continue, some end their lives because of even short-term or relatively small problems. Christians are not immune to difficulties, of course. Even the apostle John described himself as “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus” (Revelation 1:9 and see 13:10; 14:12; etc.).

Fortunately, as Christians we find a great deal of guidance and encouragement in the word of God in exactly this area. The New Testament talks repeatedly about enduring in the face of suffering – and points us to specific ways to find the courage to endure.

The Hope that Helps Us Endure

One of the first things we learn from the Scriptures regarding the courage to continue is that it is based solidly on a foundation of hope. In fact, the apostle Paul tells us that the Scriptures themselves were written to provide the hope that gives us courageous endurance. Notice what he told the Christians in Rome (in his epistle written when these believers had already been experiencing persecution under the emperor Claudius, and perhaps even the terrible cruelty of Nero): “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might

have hope” (Romans 15:4). Earlier in the same letter, Paul tells us “we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3–4).

So we see that the courage to endure is not just a matter of being able to grit our teeth and somehow ignore our problems – it is based on a living active hope that God will bring us through whatever he allows to affect us, and that even while we are experiencing problems God is working with us to teach us and help us. That is why the apostle tells us in another letter:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

And this hope that helps us continue through pain and suffering of different types also shines like a beacon or fire in the night that gives us a goal and helps us continue through less dramatic but equally draining long-term problems – illnesses, financial and interpersonal difficulties, and even the ongoing grind of exhaustion from overwork and lack of rest. It is even a hope that can help us continue to work tirelessly both in striving and overcoming in our own lives (Philippians 1:6), and in helping others in theirs (Galatians 6:9). That is why Paul tells us explicitly in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 that endurance is inspired by hope.¹

But this hope-driven endurance is not something we need try to work up ourselves. It comes to us when we stay close to God and, as Paul says, “fix our eyes” on what God is accomplishing and on his eternal purpose. When we do that, the hope we need is a gift God gives. As Paul himself tells us, “the God who gives endurance and encouragement” (Romans 15:5) helps us to be “strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience” (Colossians 1:11)

We have quoted Paul primarily in this chapter and there is good reason for that. Paul, as much as any other apostle, knew what it was like to have to endure. We need only read the catalog of problems – some of them long-term – that he suffered and survived in order to see that (2

Corinthians 11:16-33). But in all he endured Paul himself maintained hope and that hope gave him the courage he needed just as it does us. We too can follow in the footsteps of Paul to the extent that we remember the connection between hope and the courage to continue. We too can allow God to give us the hope and therefore the courage we need in any circumstance, in life and even in death itself. Just as Paul said, we can also say: “I eagerly expect and hope that I will ... have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20).

¹ Paul frequently stresses the connection between hope and patient endurance in his epistles. We see this, for example, in the way he often varies his great triad of God-given qualities, “faith, hope, and love” by substituting the word “endurance” for the word “hope” (“faith, love, endurance” 1 Timothy 6:11; “faith, patience, love, endurance” 2 Timothy 3:10; “faith, love, endurance” Titus 2:2).

8. COURAGE TO SACRIFICE

The man the world knows as “Father Damien” was born Jozef De Veuster in Tremeloo, Belgium, in 1840. Like his older brother Pamphile, the young Jozef became a priest, but he longed to serve as a missionary. He is said to have prayed daily that he would be allowed to serve in this way, and when his brother – who had been selected to serve as a missionary in Hawaii – became ill, Jozef was allowed to take his place.

He arrived in Honolulu in 1864, and on his ordination there he took the name Damien. For eight years he served on the Big Island of Hawaii, but his service had hardly begun. In the early 1870’s the government of Hawaii felt forced to confine hundreds of sufferers from the terrible and then untreatable disease of leprosy (Hansen’s disease) on a remote peninsula of the island of Molokai. The conditions for those in the quarantined community were appalling, but Damien was the first to volunteer to go to serve these people – knowing full well that in doing so he risked his own life.

In 1873, the thirty-three year old Damien was introduced to the colony at Kalawao on Molokai by the Catholic Bishop of Hawaii who told the crowd of doomed and dying that he had brought them someone “who will be a father to you ... who loves you so much that ... he does not hesitate to become one of you; to live and die with you.” Damien learned the Hawaiian language and threw himself into the work of serving the colony. He immediately organized the building of a church and became a priest to the group, but he also worked with his hands to serve them. He built homes for the people, constructed a water system, made furniture, built coffins and dug graves as they were needed. More importantly, he showed the outcast and rejected leprosy sufferers acceptance in a way no one else did. He worked directly with them, dressing their ulcers, comforting and encouraging them daily.

As a result of Damien’s service and the hope he instilled, the community was transformed. Makeshift shacks were turned into painted houses, farms and gardens were started, and even schools were established. The people of the colony came to love him greatly and when Damien had opportunity to leave the island to be replaced by another priest, he elected to stay on. It is clear that the people he served had become his life. Even as early as six months after his arrival on Molokai, Damien had written to his brother “...I make myself a leper with the lepers

to gain all to Jesus Christ.” The statement would, of course, be proven true.

In 1884 it became clear that Damien had contracted leprosy. Despite the disease he continued to work to build as many homes as possible and to plan for the successful continuation of the community. Damien died of the terrible disease he had helped others live with on April 15, 1889, at the age of 49. He was mourned not only by the colony, but also by many Hawaiians who knew of the work of the man they called “Kamiano [Damien] o Moloka‘i.”

Damien’s work resulted in a greatly increased awareness of the disease of leprosy and the plight of its victims worldwide. His life and death also remain an inspiring testimony to the potential impact of personal sacrifice under the harshest and saddest conditions that occur in this world.

Sacrifice – The Ultimate Test

In many ways, our willingness to sacrifice is the ultimate test of whether Christ is truly living within us through the Spirit of God that we are given (John 14:16–18). We can have obedience, faith, trust, and even willingness to serve, and still fall short of the willingness to sacrifice for others. This truth lies behind the New Testament story of the rich young man who came to Jesus:

[A] man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Mark 10:17–22)

In this story we see the rich young man’s humility, his dedication, and his evident obedience to God’s commandments – none of which was challenged or questioned by Jesus. The story makes clear in fact, that

Jesus loved him and told him the one thing he lacked was the spirit of sacrifice. But we are told that the rich man “went away sad” because although he now knew what he must do, he did not have the courage to sacrifice his wealth for others. There is a lesson in this story for all of us, and later in his ministry Jesus drove that lesson home to his disciples when he told them:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26)

These words of Jesus are central to his teaching and should give us all pause to ask ourselves if there are areas of life in which we do not have the desire or courage to sacrifice. Fortunately, most of us do not have to physically give up our lives in order to follow Jesus, and most of us are not called to have to give up all we own, but there is no doubt that we should be willing to do so if necessary, and that we should be willing to give up any part of our lives that needs to be sacrificed.

But in our day-to-day lives, what is it that we are called to sacrifice? Most importantly, of course, Christianity calls us to sacrifice our own will to that of God, to sacrifice our own way of life to that of God, and to willingly sacrifice anything that comes between us and God. This is what Paul meant when he wrote “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

Christians are also called to sacrifice part of what we receive in order to help others. In Acts 20:35 we read the only saying of Jesus quoted outside of the Gospels that isn’t included in them – where Jesus said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This means that although the Old Testament laws of tithing are no longer in effect, the principle of tithing – of sacrificing part of our income to God and to help others – is certainly a Christian principle in full effect. Paul says explicitly that we should give as we are able (1 Corinthians 16:2). Sometimes, when our financial situation is not the best, giving even a small amount to others less fortunate than ourselves can take courage, but God always honors that kind of courage, and when it is there it invariably brings us joy as well as helping those for whom we sacrifice.

In the same way, when we willingly restrict our own freedoms and set aside our own rights, where necessary, to best help those God has called us to serve, we are sacrificing ourselves for them. This kind of self-denial is what Jesus was speaking of when he said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Jesus modeled this kind of sacrifice for us in the way he lived, as well as modeling ultimate sacrifice for us in his death. Not only did the Son of God sacrifice his own will to that of the Father (Matthew 26:39), but he also gave up his time and many physical necessities and comforts in order to serve others to the full (Matthew 20:28). This is the model that Kamiano o Moloka‘i so successfully copied with such evident courage in his extraordinary willingness to sacrifice himself for others.

Passing the Test of Sacrifice

The great sacrifices made Damien and by other men and women through the ages all required courage. It is probably true that many who sacrificed themselves for others – especially in combat or in rescue and other life-and-death situations – did so through a strong sense of duty or a feeling of responsibility. As Christians, we can share those feelings too, but ultimately the quality that most often powers Christian sacrifice on an everyday level is simply that of love. We see this in the words of Jesus himself: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13) – love can power even the ultimate sacrifice that we can make. And that love carries with it the courage to sacrifice. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu confirmed this truth when he said, “Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” Although Lao Tzu was speaking of physical love, his observation is a truth that applies equally to spiritual love.

Of course, we may sacrifice without love – as Paul wrote: “If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3 NLT). But where true outgoing love is present, it can provide the willingness and the courage to sacrifice for others – and that is necessary more often than we might think.

The two greatest commandments as enumerated by Jesus (Matthew 22:36–40) both require self-sacrifice. The first great commandment – that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – requires us to sacrifice much of our own nature. The second great commandment –

that we love our neighbor as ourselves – often requires that we sacrifice of our time and energy. The small ways in which we sacrifice what we are, and what we do, may often seem insignificant, but in reality, they represent the sacrifice of our very selves that God desires to see and with which he is well pleased. Whenever we put God and others before ourselves, we make a sacrifice of love. The sacrifice may be one we make for our marriage partner, our children, our parents, our friends, our co-workers, or for others we serve. In fact, wherever and whenever we interact with others in a meaningful way, it is usually possible to give of ourselves to some degree if we choose to do so.

Whenever we do such things, we are learning to sacrifice as Jesus did – because, as Paul so clearly states, we are no longer living for ourselves: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20 ESV).

CONCLUSION: TAKE COURAGE!

We have seen in this book that there are a number of reasons why every Christian needs courage, and we have seen some of the many types of courage in action and what a difference courage has made in the lives of believers in biblical times, through history, and today. What we need now is to understand that for all these reasons taking courage is not just encouraged of believers – it is commanded.

In the Old Testament we find a number of Hebrew words translated as “courage” in our Bibles, but all of them connote the idea of inner strength and outward determination. In context these words repeatedly show us that God promises to increase our courage if we do our part. For example, God told Joshua “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). In this verse, and in many others, we see that courage is commanded, that we are told to be strong, and that God then works with us to reinforce our courage and help it do its work.

When we turn to the New Testament, we can see courage openly or behind the scenes in virtually every book of the Christian Scriptures. The Greek word *tharseo*, translated courage in most of these instances has the primary sense of “to be bold; to trust in something or someone” (as we see in the use of *tharseo* in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament where the word is found in Proverbs 31:11 (ESV; etc.): “the heart of her husband trusts in her.” As a result of this kind of bold trust, the word also means “to be confident” or “courageous.” For the Christian, of course, it is trust in God that provides the basis for courageous belief and action, and we clearly see the relation between the command to take courage and our trust in Jesus, the Son of God. Importantly, the specific expression to “take courage” is found only seven times in the New Testament, but it is never a suggestion or something to consider – it is always a command, and in every instance but one it is a command spoken by Jesus himself (and in the remaining instance – Mark 10:49 BSB – it is spoken regarding him).

Jesus commanded people to take courage regarding both physical and spiritual circumstances. In Matthew 9:2, we see Jesus told the paralyzed man to take courage because “your sins are forgiven.” In Matthew 9:22, Jesus told the woman with a flow of blood to take courage because “your faith has healed you.” In Matthew 14:27 (and also Mark 6:50), when Jesus

came to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, he told them to take courage because “It is I. Don’t be afraid.” In John 16:33 BSB, Jesus told his disciples to take courage because “I have overcome the world!” Finally, in Acts 23:11, when Jesus appeared to Paul in prison, he told him to take courage because he would enable him to go to Rome to continue his work. In every case the commanded courage was to be based on faith in the power of Jesus himself. This can be tremendously encouraging because we are not simply commanded to take courage then left to do our best on our own strength. Rather, we are only commanded because the help of God is available to us.

A simple analogy can help us understand this. In the game of chess, the lowly pawn – just as the human believer – has little power of its own. But chess contains the possibility of “promotion” in which, given the right circumstances, a lowly pawn is converted to a queen – the most powerful piece on the board. In the same way, if we allow ourselves to be used by God, he can take us and turn us into courageous performers and wielders of faith. That is the truth that lies behind scriptures in both the Old and New Testament in which believers asked for and received courageous strength. We see it, for example, in the words of the warrior David: “On the day I called, You answered me; You emboldened me and strengthened my soul” (Psalm 138:3 BSB); and those of the apostle Paul: “Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel ... Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (Ephesians 6:19–20).

We can be of good courage because boldness to do what is right and to do the work of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It was one of the very first characteristics manifested when the Spirit indwelt believers at the inception of the New Testament church. Although the followers of Jesus had been hiding in fear of the Jewish religious authorities (Acts 1:12–14), once the Holy Spirit came, the same timid disciples became courageous preachers (Acts 2:1–4). Even though they soon faced persecution for their teaching, they responded by praying for boldness and their prayer was answered – through the help of the Holy Spirit they “spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31).

Paul knew that this was not a one-time event, and that God will also give us the courage we need if we only ask and then act in faith. That is why Paul, perhaps the most courageous of all the apostles, could write: “So we are always of good courage ... for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage” (2 Corinthians 5:6–8 ESV).

Courage is not just for heroes – it is for everyone who desires to do what is right and to do the work God calls us to. That is why God commands us all to live courageously and offers us the help that we need to do so. If we look back through history, we can see that the effect of courage on the growth of Christianity has been enormous – with God’s help in our own lives, the effect of Christianity on the growth of our courage can be equally profound. Courage is possible for everyone and available for all who need it. That is why we are told repeatedly: “Take courage!”

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