

LIVING FOR GOD AS



# COURAGEOUS TEENS

MICHAEL CATT  
WITH AMY PARKER



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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Dedicated to my long-time friend Jay Strack, who has devoted his life to raising the next generation for Christ.

Jay is the founder of Student Leadership University, targeting students. Both of my daughters were greatly impacted by “Uncle Jay” and his love for students and student ministry.



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Blessings,

Michael Catt

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Love,

Amy Parker

[www.AmyParkerBooks.com](http://www.AmyParkerBooks.com)

# Introduction:

## Why You Need This Book and Why I Had to Write It

**T**he story is told of a battle where the flag bearer got so far ahead of the regiment that the officer called back to headquarters and asked, “Shall we bring the flag back to the regiment?”

The commanding officer said, “No, make the regiment catch up with the flag!”

Today we need young people with the hearts of warriors; people who will run to catch up with the flag Christ carries ahead of us. People who won’t turn back. But the responsibility to mentor those young people falls to me, to *my* generation.

During our Disciple Now weekend in 2012, Tally Wilgis, pastor of one of our church plants in Baltimore, was our guest speaker. Tally asked the students, “How many of you know for certain that one of your parents has led a person to Christ in the last year?” Out of the 250 students, only 12 stood in agreement.

In a church filled with “Bible-believing” people, it’s hard for me to imagine we are that apathetic about sharing our faith. It is a denial of the Great Commission and a bad example for you, our next generation. Faith works or it is not faith. Faith gives evidence by what it does.

As I relate this story, I also remember that I never heard my parents share their faith or invite anyone to visit our church. It wasn’t modeled for me, even though we went to church every Sunday.

Having served as a youth minister for fifteen years, I have seen the good, bad, and ugly of students and families. Knowing that the majority of today’s teenagers do not attend a church of any kind, it is a reminder of how crucial a parent’s role is in spiritual development. When parents are the real

deal, there is a far better chance that the students in those homes will grow up and serve the Lord.

Of course, there are many kids who beat the odds; some of my best students came from homes where there was no support. I've termed their parents "phantom parents," because they would drop their kids off for events and disappear. They never participated in the life of the church and gave no real spiritual support to their kids. Unless the people of my generation take the time to equip you, our young people, with spiritual courage, the church is always just one generation away from extinction.

I understand that it's tough out there. I see the news. I spend time with the youth in our church. I have children of my own. But I know that it only makes it tougher when there's no example of Christian faith to follow.

That's why I'm writing this book.

In these pages I explore the examples of people in the Bible who displayed great courage when playing it safe would have been easier. Each section begins with a segment of Joshua's story of courage and throughout we explore other leading examples of courage in the Bible. Esther and Moses, Daniel and Jesus—each story challenges us to keep moving forward. They cause us to examine our priorities and deal with anything that brings fear to our hearts. They call us to have a faith that matches our mountains.

Abraham Lincoln once visited the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to hear a sermon by the pastor, Dr. Gurley. As the War Between the States was being fought, Lincoln battled discouragement. After the message one of Lincoln's aides asked him what he thought of the sermon. Lincoln replied, "I thought it was well thought through, powerfully delivered, and very eloquent." Thus, the aide assumed Lincoln thought it was a great sermon. But Lincoln said, "No, it failed because the pastor did not ask of us something great."

I'm praying God will call you to do something great for His name and His glory. It may not make the headlines, but greatness is determined by God, not by man. Most of all, I am praying that you have the courage to answer that call.

I'm encouraged by some of what I see today. I'm seeing young men and women who have been turned off by their parents' obsession with things. They are willing to be less "successful" so they can be more significant. If



we can raise up an army of courageous soldiers for Christ, we can once again recapture that adventuresome faith of biblical days and win the world for Christ. It's not too late.

Of course, I'm praying that my generation will not drop the ball. But there is much work left to be done for the next generation. I'm praying that God will raise up this generation as giants of the faith. I hope and pray this book will find its way into the hands of young people who will say, "By the grace of God, I will make a difference with my life. I will count the cost, pay the price, stand in the gap, and confront the culture."

I'm asking God to give the body of Christ a tenacity that seems to be strangely lacking in this hour. Caleb was an old man when he said, "Give me this mountain." Samuel was a young man when he heard from God. I'm asking God to use this book to call people from every generation and every tribe and tongue to be courageous.

**WE NEED TO STEP OUT IN FAITH!**

**WE NEED TO BE COURAGEOUS!**

**WE NEED TO DO IT NOW!**

# SECTION 1:

## COURAGEOUS FAITH

To be courageous,  
you must learn  
to trust God.

# *THE SCRIPT*

## **-TRUST-**

### **EXT. SHOOTING RANGE – MIDDAY**

NATHAN cleans his gun as DAVID sits on the bench, looking down at the ground.

**DAVID**

I'm just tired of feeling guilty.

**NATHAN**

Let me break it to you this way: you *are* guilty.

NATHAN walks over to DAVID and sits beside him.

**NATHAN (CONT'D)**

Listen, one day you, me, and every one of us are gonna stand before God, and He's gonna do what good judges do.

**DAVID**

Well, I hope my good outweighs my bad, Nathan.

**NATHAN**

(shaking his head) That's not the way it works. You know that. Let me put it this way. Who's the person you're closest to?

**DAVID**

Probably my mom.

**NATHAN**

Okay. (pauses) Suppose she was brutally attacked and murdered in a parking lot. The guy was caught and put on trial. But he says, "Hey judge, I've committed this crime, but I've done a lot of good in my life." If the judge let him go free, would you say he's a good judge or a bad judge?

**DAVID**

A bad one.

**NATHAN**



That's right. Because the Bible says that God is a good judge, and He will punish the guilty not for what they did right but for what they did wrong. Because He loved us, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take the punishment that *we* deserve and put it on Himself. And *that's* why He died on the cross.

(pauses) But that only applies if you accept it. That's why I asked for His forgiveness. I asked Him to save *me*. And I'm a new man because of Christ.

Do you understand what I'm telling you?

DAVID nods.

**NATHAN**

Then what's holding you back?

# ***The Scripture***

## **Joshua Trusts God**

*The LORD spoke to Moses: “Send men to scout out the land of Canaan I am giving to the Israelites. Send one man who is a leader among them from each of their ancestral tribes.” . . . When Moses sent them to scout out the land of Canaan, he told them, “Go up this way to the Negev, then go up into the hill country. See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. . . . Be courageous.”*

*At the end of 40 days they returned from scouting out the land. They reported to Moses: “We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit. However, the people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified. . . .”*

*Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, “We must go up and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!”*

*But the men who had gone up with him responded, “We can’t go up against the people because they are stronger than we are!”. . . To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and we must have seemed the same to them.”*

*Then the whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites complained about Moses and Aaron, and the whole community told them, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this wilderness! . . . Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let’s appoint a leader and go back to Egypt.”*

*Then Moses and Aaron fell down with their faces to the ground in front of the whole assembly of the Israelite community. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who scouted out the land,*

*tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite community: “The land we passed through and explored is an extremely good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, He will bring us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us. Only don’t rebel against the LORD, and don’t be afraid of the people of the land, for we will devour them. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us. Don’t be afraid of them!” . . .*

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron: “How long must I endure this evil community that keeps complaining about Me? I have heard the Israelites’ complaints that they make against Me. Tell them: As surely as I live,” this is the LORD’s declaration, “I will do to you exactly as I heard you say. . . . I swear that none of you will enter the land I promised to settle you in, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. . . .”*

Numbers 13:1–2, 17–18, 20, 25, 27–28, 30–31, 33; 14:1–9, 26–28, 30



## CHAPTER 1

# The Courage to Get Going

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going.”

HEBREWS 11:8

*“You can’t fall asleep at the wheel, only to wake up one day and realize that your job or your hobbies have no eternal value.”*

—ADAM MITCHELL, *COURAGEOUS*

**E**very journey begins with a step.

I can remember watching the first landing on the moon. It was historic. I can still see it in my mind as Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon and said, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” History is filled with stories of adventurers, men and women who dared to dream, explore, and discover. In 1953 Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first to conquer Mount Everest, more than twenty-five years after the first climbers attempted to top the summit. You’ve probably also heard of Orville and Wilbur Wright and Amelia Earhart, all pioneers in the world of aviation.

In the church today, there is a whole new generation of young adults who are willing to lay aside the comforts of home to give their lives on a foreign field. I believe we are seeing a new generation of Christ followers who are risk takers for the gospel.

We need more.

Far too few choose to live a faithfully adventurous life. They seem content to be absorbed in the daily grind. They think a faith-filled life is for someone else, someone they could never become. We are desperately in need of heroes who refuse to limit what God can do. So here I am, challenging you—yes *you*—here and now, to have the courage to dream

big. As D. L. Moody used to say, “If God is your partner, make your plans big.”

“Safety first” is not the motto of a risk taker. It may work when learning to drive, but it doesn’t work on the field of faith. And it has never been the motto of the courageous.

C. S. Lewis said, “The safest road to hell is the gradual one.”<sup>1</sup> People of courage make a way where there is no way. Instead of cowering to the pressures of this culture, Christians need to become a force for positive peer pressure. It’s time to put on the shoes of faith and take an incredible journey with God. The founder of Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford, said, “I am looking for a lot of men who have an infinite capacity to not know what can’t be done.” God is looking for guys and girls who believe that with Christ nothing is impossible.

The question is: do you?

We’ve been lulled into settling for average so long that average seems acceptable. But I believe a desire burns within the heart of each and every person to make a difference, to leave a mark. Unfortunately we’ve been average for so long that when people are above average, we tend to think they are eccentric.

Some of the most courageous people in history were people who could have easily ended up on the shelf of mediocrity. Abraham Lincoln was a failure most of his life until he became president. Stonewall Jackson was failing as a teacher at Virginia Military Institute, yet in the crisis of battle he blossomed. D. L. Moody, an uneducated shoe salesman, ended up being one of the most famous evangelists of the nineteenth century. He also established ministries and institutions that are still going strong in the twenty-first century. The army motto said, “Be all that you can be.” But more importantly, it’s time for you to be all that God saved you to be.

Don’t just settle—*soar*!

When my daughter Hayley went to youth camps, the speakers would tell campers that they should give their lives totally to Christ without fear or hesitation. They would say, “God probably won’t make you go live in a mud hut in Africa, so don’t be afraid of God’s will.” Hayley later told me, “I was always terrified He would send me to Africa. Now I wonder why in the world I had been taught to fear that! Now I would go in a heartbeat.” In

2010, she spent two weeks working in an orphanage and on a safe-water project in Uganda. She said, “I need Africa more than Africa needs me.” In 2010, she spent two weeks working in an orphanage and on a safe-water project in Uganda, and as I edit this book, she has just returned from another short-term trip to Africa.

Have you heard the old adage, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained”? If there’s no venture, no vision, there’s no legacy. I’m praying for God to raise up this generation to venture out and discover that the view is worth the climb. God longs to find a young man or woman He can trust with a great opportunity. He is looking for *you*.

Think about the heroes of the Bible. They didn’t emerge from a cookie-cutter factory. They were all unique and distinctively different. The world is full of mimics. You’ve seen them. Maybe you’ve even been one. Fearing the opinions of others, we fall into the rut of conformity. What we need now are mavericks. When I read the Scriptures, I see pages full of mavericks. They wouldn’t let the culture or the times define them. They refused to fit into a religious box—even if it was an acceptable box for most folks.

What made them mavericks? Faith. They weren’t afraid to leave a country, walk on water, confront false prophets, rebuke kings, or pray for miracles. Who says we can’t do the same today?

Warren Wiersbe noted, “Believing God means standing up and facing an impossible challenge without fear of what might happen when we obey God’s will.”<sup>2</sup> That’s the attitude of the courageous. Look at the multiple examples in the Old Testament. By faith Abel offered the acceptable sacrifice. By faith Enoch walked with God. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abraham left his home and traveled to an unknown land. He pulled up roots, leaving everything familiar to obey the voice of God.

Let’s look more closely at father Abraham. Early in Genesis God deals with humanity in general. But when we get to Abraham, we get a close-up on that one man as our example. “The LORD said to Abram: ‘Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen. 12:1). Abram was already settled; he was set for life. However, God’s plan wasn’t for Abraham to coast to the finish line. He had something more.



How did Abraham answer God's calling? Did he whine, "But *God*, I've already got a place to live! Everyone looks up to me. Look at all this stuff I've got!"

Nope. He answered courageously.

The book of Hebrews summarizes the courage of Abraham: "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going" (11:8). Here was a man with no map or GPS. He didn't have a navigation app on his phone. But when God said, "Get out, and go on," Abraham left, not knowing where he was going.

Could it be that God is calling you to move on? No, it doesn't mean that you've got to pack up and move out of your home. But maybe it does mean that you need to move beyond your comfort zone. Look out onto something a little scary, something that takes a little faith, where you hear God's whisper, and. Take. That. First. Step.

Leaving his home in Ur was a breakthrough in Abraham's life. If Abraham had failed to obey, he would be buried in some unknown grave in present-day Iraq. No one would remember him, and no one would care. Breakthroughs are turning points, pivotal moments when we are given the opportunity to believe God for something great. Abraham's obedience made him one of the most courageous men in history, as few men have cut such a broad path.

Abraham shows us that the choices we make determine the roads we take. Choices have consequences and reveal our true character. I'm not talking about a positive attitude. I'm talking about biblical faith—the courage to step out and do big things for the glory of God.

We need to be identified as followers of Christ, not by the clothes we wear, the stuff we have, or the car we drive. Life should not be about stuff, it should be about the Savior. Abraham is considered the father of the faithful. Faith obeys, walks, and builds. When God called Abraham, Abraham moved. He didn't ask for details, look for perks, or negotiate. He just got up and got going. God's call is not a vacation; it's our vocation. It's time to get going. We can't sit on the sidelines any longer. We must hear God and follow hard after Him.

In the church that I pastor, I get reenergized when I see young people making great strides in their walk of faith. One young man came to me and

said, “It encourages my generation to see your passion. I want you to know we hear your heart.” They don’t stop at being good church members; they want to reach out beyond those four walls and make a difference with their lives. Abraham himself knew life in the lap of luxury, but he was willing to walk away and be a sojourner. From luxury living to a nomadic tent is a stretch for most people. But those stretches are made possible through faith.

Katie Davis is an incredible young lady who now lives in Uganda. She is in her early twenties and has adopted numerous children. She left the comfort of home at age eighteen, believing God’s Word and call on her life. She believes in Christ’s ability to protect, provide, and sustain.

God called Abraham to a new land.

God called Katie to Africa.

Where is God calling you?

We each have a choice: we can be average or exceptional. We can play at church, or we can be radical for Christ. We can base our lives on the world’s standards of success, or we can dig into the Bible and ask God to show us where *He* wants us to live and who *He* wants us to be.

Abraham’s greater calling was to leave the land where God was largely ignored to follow the one true God. Stepping out for God always involves steps of separation. This is no time for cowards or the fainthearted. We need courage. The life of courage will see what others can’t see and believe what others can’t believe. Courage is a pattern and a path that will keep us going when all around us are falling and falling.

The choices you make right now matter. Fifty years from now, you will still be affected by the decisions you’ll make over the next few years.

Choices like:

- Where will I go to college?
- What kind of career will I have?
- Will I marry? Will we have children?
- What kind of church will I join?
- Will I choose to obey God, faithfully, *courageously*?

My wife and I grew up in the South. After college we were trying to decide where to go to seminary. I had been offered a full scholarship to a school not very far from our home, but I didn’t have a peace about it.

Instead, Terri and I ended up going to a school in the North that was a twenty-two-hour drive from home. No one understood why we would move so far. But all we knew was that we needed to follow God. With little money, an undependable car, no winter clothes, no jobs, and no scholarship, we set off for seminary. And you know what? We have *never, not for one moment*, regretted that choice.

I can look back now and say that every significant relationship and every influence in my life spiritually has come because of that one choice. God placed people in our path who molded us and marked us. They would not let me settle for being a typical minister. They stretched me, prayed for me, and helped me. I am who I am today because of their influence.

You've probably already noticed that America is a mobile society. As you seek to make your own place in this world, you may find yourself swept up in that society, people who are constantly moving, many searching for the elusive American dream. Some move to pursue a career. Some move to escape problems. Others want a new start. But may I recommend that yours is always a move of faith?

It takes courage to step out and take a faith venture. Are you that kind of person? Faith, biblical faith, has to be courageous. Anyone can believe God once he has all the facts, but courageous faith obeys regardless of the situation.

When we began shooting the movie *Fireproof*, our oldest daughter Erin came to read for a small part. She was working full-time with Disney and knew she would only have time for a small role where she could take a few days off. As the process moved forward, the casting team began to talk about the possibility of Erin playing the role of Catherine opposite Kirk Cameron. Erin certainly wasn't expecting such a role. Taking the role would mean giving up her job, income, and insurance. Still, Erin took that step of faith and quit her job, believing that God would provide.

During filming Erin moved back in with us. It may have seemed like a step backward for an independent girl, but one week before shooting the final scene, Disney called and offered Erin her dream role and a contract. God blessed her obedience. She didn't play it safe, and God provided beyond her expectations. As a friend of mine says, "Jump! The net will appear!"

I don't know the name of any individual who stayed in Ur and played it safe. I do know of Abraham. Through one man a nation was birthed, the world would be blessed, and through his lineage redemption would come through Christ.

*What could God do with you?*

Too many people spend their lives in the valley of good intentions. They start, but they never finish. Courage demands a decision. It demands we separate from the pack. It demands we lay aside secondary things, our obsession with gadgets, gimmicks, and video games. Courageous people travel light.

We are to be in the world but not of it. The heroes of Hebrews 11 were polar opposites to the so-called heroes of today. In a world of celebrities and fifteen minutes of fame, we need heroes. In a culture driven by seeking stardom, we need men and women who want to be servants. In this decade of *American Idol*, we need a generation who will not worship the gods of this world and will serve the one true God.

Even after the decision is made, we all know that courage can falter. God knows that too. So He's provided a way to maintain that courage—through prayer. We see no altar to God in Haran or in Egypt, places of detour and delay on Abraham's journey. Isn't that true of all of us? When we detour or delay our obedience, we forget God and the promises we've made, and we start looking at circumstances.

Abraham wasn't perfect, and he made some mistakes along the way. He carried some baggage, which slowed him down. The devil knew that. And you'd better believe that he's looking for your faults, for your weak spots. Satan doesn't have to tempt us with evil if he can get us to delay or detour for a "good" reason. To live courageously, however, you can't be tied down (see Luke 14:26–33). I've met countless people who have been slowed down or have stopped on the road of obedience. The courageous person faces the tests of life head-on.

Think about the people you go to school with, friends and family, or even celebrities. How many people have you seen hit bottom because they couldn't separate themselves from the crowd and public opinion? Their tombstone will read, "What could have been." Don't let that be the legacy that you leave behind.

Self-centeredness is ugly enough in the world, but it's even uglier in the life of a Christian. If you live courageously, you may lose some friends or have family members misunderstand you. The crowd thins out the higher you climb. Like Abraham, you have to decide to move on.

In some ways Abraham's life looks like a graph. Of course, there are the ups and downs of life, but it's always moving up. The key question is: when confronted by a test, will we obey? Ask yourself, "Am I headed in the right direction or taking unnecessary detours?" Work out what God is working in you.

Courageous people are willing to leave their Ur, their old life, and all its shiny things behind. They know the dangers of popularity and peer pressure and obsessing over the next new gadget. Signs of Abraham's faith were the altars he built. He lived in a tent, but you find him building altars along the journey. An altar is a place of worship, commitment, and renewal. At the altar we establish a relationship with God or renew our commitments to God.

Today so many people just want to make a name for themselves. God promised Abraham that his name would be great. He is remembered in the Faith Hall of Fame (Heb. 11). Abraham was great because his ultimate goal was to make the name of the Lord great. Do you see how that works? Abraham was a man of courage and a friend of God.

James Montgomery Boice writes, "The epithet 'friend' exalts Abraham, but it also brings the patriarch down to our level. Most of us are aware that we will never become lawgivers like Moses. We are unlikely to become generals like Joshua or kings like David. We will not be prophets, except in the sense that we are all called to be witnesses for Christ."<sup>3</sup>

I may never be famous, but I can be a person who hears God, believes God, and is intimate with God. I can be a person of conviction and purpose. I can leave a mark and make an impact. But I must have the courage to do it.

What drives you and motivates you? What is your purpose?

In Genesis 15 Abraham encountered God in a new and fresh way. God didn't show Abraham everything. God showed Abraham just enough for Abraham to take that first step. In the same way, our responsibility is to take that initial step of faith and leave the results to God (see Gen. 15:1–8).

Courage doesn't mean the absence of fear, but responding in spite of fear. Abraham's story is the first time we see the words "do not be afraid" (v. 1) in the Bible. Fear is the enemy of faith. Have you ever thought about it that way? Courage will place you in a battle that fear would run from, but faith stands firm knowing that God is "your shield" (v. 1). That's a greater promise than an army of ten thousand at your side.

By the world's standards Abraham didn't do anything great. The largest army he ever led consisted of only 318 men. He never built fortresses or palaces, but his legacy fills the last thirty-eight chapters of the book of Genesis. Thousands of years later, here we are, still talking about him. I would say God fulfilled His promise to make Abraham's name great. Wouldn't you?

You have within you the capacity for something God-sized, something so big that God is glorified through your life. To achieve that, you must walk by faith daily. Courageous faith is holy and practical. Learn to listen to that faith, and it will tune out any voice that calls you to go backward. It will call you to live above average and mediocre.

Several years ago Jim McBride, our executive pastor, and I went to Green Bay to visit Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila, who was a defensive end for the Green Bay Packers. He had purchased copies of one of our films, *Facing the Giants*, for the team and management, and he invited us up for a day to visit a practice. This was one travel decision I didn't have to pray about!

Later that evening Kabeer invited us to his home. We met his family, and as we were leaving he said, "You've got to see my dog." When he moved to Green Bay, he was single and learning the Packer playbook. In the process he taught his dog several plays out of the offensive playbook. His dog knew from Kabeer's call whether to go into the tailback or slot positions or to go as a wideout. The dog knew whether to take a handoff or run a slant pattern or a down-and-out. It was amazing. As we were leaving I thought, *If a dog can learn a complicated NFL playbook, what's wrong with us? Why do we want to stay in bed when a voice is calling us to go deep?*

Throughout Scripture we are reminded that Abraham "believed the LORD and He credited it to him as righteousness" (see Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3, 22; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23). Paul devoted a lengthy portion of Romans to the story of Abraham, and he holds a place of significance in Hebrews 11. Is your faith worth writing about?

In Genesis 17 we read, “Live in My presence and be blameless” (v. 1). God’s call to courageous living is not a hundred-yard dash; it’s a marathon. The verse doesn’t say “Visit My presence on Sundays.” It doesn’t say, “You can leave My presence while you’re hanging out with friends.” What does it say? That’s right. *Live*. “Live in My presence.” Walking with God requires sacrifice, commitment, and obedience. It’s not easy, and it will require giving up some things of this world. But we must remember the words of Jesus when He called His followers to *leave* and follow Him (see Luke 9:57–62).

Do you know where you’re headed? Genesis 25 speaks of Abraham’s legacy: “He took his last breath and died at a ripe old age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his people” (v. 8). He fulfilled his purpose and was ready to die. Nothing left to be done. He had run the race and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7–8). Most of us will not be great in the eyes of this world, but we can be remembered as Abraham, a man who heard the voice of God and followed, a man known as a friend of God (see James 2:23). Which would you rather be?

As a pastor, I’ve seen far too many people who are cynical, sour, and bitter. They don’t seem happy with any aspect of their lives, so they grumble and complain. I wonder what their lives would have been like if they had bought into God’s plan instead of the American dream (which has become the American nightmare). Don’t come to the end of your life asking, “What if . . . ?” There is a world of difference between standing at a grave and saying, “What a life!” and standing at a grave saying, “What a waste.”

Start now.

Live courageously.

Get going.

## — Think Courageously —

1. If you could do anything in the world, knowing you’d be successful, what would it be?
2. In what areas are you gifted or talented?



3. Have you seen some hints of God's calling in your life? What are they?
4. Who, in your life, would you describe as courageous? In what situation did he or she show courage?
5. How do you want to be remembered?

## CHAPTER 2

# The Courage to Face an Uncertain Future

“Don’t think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king’s palace. . . . Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.”

ESTHER 4:13–14

*“People who go through this, and learn to trust in the Lord, find a comfort and an intimacy with God that most people never experience. . . . God doesn’t promise us an explanation, but He does promise to walk with us through our pain.”*

—PASTOR ROGERS, *COURAGEOUS*

I love the women of *Courageous*. The wives, Victoria Mitchell (Renee Jewell), Carmen Martinez (Angelita Nelson), and Kayla Hayes (Eleanor Brown), represent women who are facing various crises of faith. In each family, there are situations and circumstances that test them and tempt them to fear.

But you—well, you’re just a teenager, right? You have no real reason to fear. You have no family to support, no groceries to buy, no children to raise. . . .

*Right?*

Absolutely, without a doubt . . . *wrong*.

It started long ago with those monsters in your closet and has grown into much scarier things—monsters at school, monsters in your mind, monsters in your future. Those are real issues, not to be underestimated. However, you must learn, once and for all, to move past a state of fear and deal with those issues in positive, productive ways. That’s what being courageous is all about.

If you've never really learned how to deal with fear, it can cripple you or destroy you. In tough times we are often paralyzed by fear of the unknown. Because fear is such a powerful force, we've often dealt with it in our movies from Sherwood Pictures. In *Flywheel* we dealt with the fear of losing all of one's possessions and the respect of a son. In *Facing the Giants*, we dealt with the fear of failure. In *Fireproof* we addressed the fear of a failed family. And in *Courageous* we address issues of fear that bombard our society on multiple levels.

Whether we're nine, ninety, or anywhere in between, we will all at times face an uncertain future. The difference-maker is how we respond to that uncertainty. Fear or faith? It's our choice. At its core, fear is believing a lie, listening to negative voices, and not taking God at His Word. However, as my dear friend Manley Beasley put it, faith is "believing that it's so when it's not so, so that it can be so because God said it's so." Faith is fear that has said its prayers.

Fortunately, the Bible provides us with some tried and true examples of young people who faced uncertain futures. They were faced with situations that would cause the most stoic of adults to crumble. With one whim, these youth could have chosen the other path, the easier road, and disappeared into history. But they didn't. And after thousands of years, they are still inspiring us to muster our courage and step out in faith.

One of these is a young lady named Esther. (Her story is found in the book of Esther.) Esther's parents had died, and she was adopted by her cousin, Mordecai. Already, we could say that Esther has had a pretty challenging life. Do you know anyone who has lost both of her parents? Having the benefit of knowing the whole story, we can also see how those challenges may have strengthened her character, preparing her for an opportunity that God had in store.

As a young lady, Esther was highly favored by the king and soon found herself crowned queen. Through the process, Mordecai had warned her not to reveal her Jewish background, so she didn't. Then Mordecai learned of a plan to destroy all of the Jews—a plan from none other than the king's right-hand man, Haman.

Now, put yourself in Esther's position. She'd lost her parents. She'd been taken away from Mordecai. And now, when she may finally have a chance to feel at home, when she can finally see a future for herself as

queen, she learns that the king had signed a law that would annihilate the Jewish people—her people, *herself*. It's pretty safe to say that Esther faced an uncertain future.

What could Esther—one girl—do? Although she was queen, if she even approached the king without permission, she could be killed. Something had to be done, but there was no room for error. So she went back to the one man she trusted, to the one she had always taken guidance from, to her family, Mordecai.

Let's step into the Bible here:

Mordecai told the messenger to reply to Esther, “Don’t think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king’s palace. If you keep silent at this time, liberation and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father’s house will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.” (Esther 4:13–14)

Note three key lessons in Mordecai’s reply. 1) He recognized the uncertainty that Esther faced. 2) He believed in God’s promise to the Jewish people. 3) He saw the big picture of God’s plan for Esther. We would all be fortunate to have a Mordecai in our lives. But even if we don’t have a wise older cousin to run to, we can still apply the wisdom of Mordecai to our own situations. In Esther’s case, that reply was apparently the exact vote of confidence that she needed.

Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go and assemble all the Jews who can be found in Susa and fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, day or night. I and my female servants will also fast in the same way. After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:15–16)

After the messenger delivered Mordecai’s assessment of the situation, Esther kicked into defense mode. She made a plan. It’s important to note here, too, that the plan didn’t come from Mordecai. He provided the

perspective, but the next move was up to Esther. The outcome was unknown, but she would give it her best shot.

Esther's decision wasn't rash; it was calm and calculated. She called together God's people to fast, to prepare themselves spiritually, before she, alone, risked her life before the king. Although she was just a girl, she was willing to lay her life on the line for her people. "If I perish, I perish."

God rewarded Esther's obedience, her willingness to sacrifice for her people, for God's people. God had placed her in the position to make a difference, but the choice was hers. Because of Esther, the Jewish people were saved. And Haman? Well, let's just say that he never threatened the Jewish people again.

What an outstanding example to consider when faced with uncertain times! The story of Esther shows us how to be courageous. It should be a ray of hope in any season of uncertainty. It tells us that God rules and overrules, that God rewards obedience and sacrifice, that God is true to His promises. But it also tells us that the choice to be courageous is ours.

Another favorite Bible character from Genesis is Joseph (the son of Jacob). Joseph is bombarded with uncertainty again and again. However, he never seemed to doubt God's plan for his life. At a young age, he began having dreams, dreams that seemed to say he would rule over his ten older brothers, dreams that made his ten older brothers really mad.

It didn't help that Joseph was obviously one of his father's favorites. Joseph and his younger brother, Benjamin, had been born to Jacob in his old age, so he clearly showed favor to them. For one, Jacob had made a beautiful robe of many colors for Joseph. And Joseph's brothers just waited for a chance to get their revenge.

One day, as the brothers were out tending sheep, Joseph's father sent him to check on them. When the brothers saw Joseph coming, they made a plan. "They said to one another, 'Here comes that dreamer! Come on, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We can say that a vicious animal ate him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!'" (Gen. 37:19–20).

One brother, Reuben, couldn't let that happen. He said, "Don't shed blood. Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him" (Gen. 37:22). Reuben had planned to rescue Joseph later and send him

back home safely. So, Joseph's brothers tore off his notorious robe, threw him in a pit, then sat down to eat.

What do you think was going through Joseph's head at that moment? He had always been favored by his father, obedient to his family. And here he was in his underclothes, at the bottom of an empty pit.

Soon, from the bottom of the pit, Joseph hears a noise, a rumbling, a cacophony of voices, a hoard of hooves. It was a caravan of Midianite traders. A deal was made, money was exchanged, and Joseph was pulled out of the pit. Any momentary relief Joseph may have felt quickly faded as he was put in the hands of the Midianites. From there, Joseph watched the only family he'd ever known disappear into the horizon as he was carried off into Egypt. Joseph, the favored son, was now alone, a slave in a strange country.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold to work for one of the pharaoh's officers, a man named Potiphar. Joseph was well-liked and successful there, but when Potiphar's wife made a false accusation against Joseph, he found himself in prison. Yet, even in prison, Joseph found success. The warden gave Joseph authority over all of the other prisoners. Genesis 39:23 tells us, "The warden did not bother with anything under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him, and the LORD made everything that he did successful."

Years later, Joseph is called from prison to interpret the king's dreams. In doing so, Joseph is able to prepare Egypt for a famine, practically saving the entire country. Joseph is then given authority over all of Egypt, next to the king.

Through it all, as much as Joseph's situation changed, Joseph stayed the same: an honest, obedient servant. God was with Joseph, protecting him and rewarding him for his unwavering faith. Of course, if you know the story, you know that Joseph's dreams came true too. Joseph's brothers did end up coming to him—literally bowing before him—and asking to buy food in the midst of the famine. Joseph could have easily chosen anger and revenge on his brothers. He certainly had the power to do anything he wanted with them. However, Joseph quickly forgave his brothers, reunited with his entire family, and moved them to Egypt with him, where they would have plenty throughout the famine and beyond.

By facing the unknown with an unshakable faith, Joseph's uncertain future grew brighter and brighter, so much that the future of his entire

family was improved. That faith also allowed Joseph to have an open heart when his brothers needed his forgiveness the most. As Joseph sums it up, “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

Still, what about the times when it’s no one’s fault, when no evil was planned, but devastation still strikes? If you have ever walked through the death of someone you love, you will have no problem putting yourself in the story of Ruth. It’s a story of bereavement that turns into a story of blessing. Like our other characters, neither Naomi nor Ruth knew it at the time. Naomi had lost her son; Ruth had lost her husband. I’m sure people offered them trite comforts like, “You’ll get over it.” But you don’t. Or, “Time heals all wounds.” But it doesn’t. “You’ll always have your memories.” But what you really want is flesh and blood to hug and hold.

Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, the small town she and her husband Elimelech had left because of a famine. Ruth, her daughter-in-law, was determined to go with her. That took courage. This was not an easy decision. They had no way of making money, and two women traveling alone was not the safest of arrangements. Still, Ruth chose the more difficult course, having no idea how she would be received when she arrived in Bethlehem (see Ruth 1:16–22). The selfless response of Ruth to Naomi is the hinge on which the door of this story swings. As a result, Ruth’s willingness to follow would result in a blessing for Ruth and Naomi and ultimately for Israel and all who believe.

Naomi was no encourager of faith for Ruth. As the women returned to Bethlehem, she complained of her lot in life. She no longer wanted to be called *Naomi*, which means “pleasant,” but *Mara*, which means “bitter.” Naomi felt God had treated her unfairly, and she pointed at Him with an accusatory finger. “‘Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara,’ she answered, ‘for the Almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has pronounced judgment on me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?’” (1:20–21). Naomi had built walls around her life. She had been hurt, and she wasn’t trying to hide it.

It’s easy to assume this attitude, especially in our culture of entitlement. Or when you feel you haven’t gotten your slice of the American dream. “The world owes me.” “God owes me.” “I deserve better.” “I should have



more.” When life slaps you with the unexpected, you can choose to respond like Naomi.

Or you can choose to respond like Ruth.

Ruth didn’t allow bitterness to poison her. She exhibited courage in her affirmations that are still quoted to this day. Warren Wiersbe writes, “Naomi let her circumstances make her bitter. Ruth let them make her better. Ruth’s attitude brought a blessing that cannot be measured.”<sup>1</sup> Ruth acted with courage, although no blessings had been promised.

As Ruth’s story—and God’s sovereign provision—unfolded, she had to find a way to make a living. God used a man named Boaz as a picture of grace: “She happened to be in the portion of land belonging to Boaz” (2:3). Boaz allowed Ruth to glean in his field. He even made sure she had water and plenty of provisions because he had heard of her love for Naomi. He ordered his reapers to deliberately drop handfuls of barley so Ruth would have more food.

She said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge” (2:10–12 NASB).

Hope was on the horizon as Boaz took an interest in Ruth and watched over her.

Ultimately Boaz would become the Moabite’s *kinsman-redeemer*. The term is used thirteen times in this story. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* notes:

The kinsman-redeemer was a near blood-relative and always male. This near-kinsman (or one of them, if many) had a duty to protect his weaker relatives. He had to redeem property belonging to relatives when they had to sell land or goods (Lev 25:23–25) and even their persons when they had sold themselves into slavery (Lev 25:47–55). . . . In the case of Ruth, it was important that the nearer

relative give up his right/duty in favor of Boaz (Ruth 4:6). The kinsman-redeemer was also duty bound to come to the defense or aid of a relative in either a legal or an actual struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Ruth even reminded Boaz that he was a kinsman-redeemer. Despite the fact that Boaz was older and Ruth was a younger woman, she chose Boaz. By redeeming Ruth, Boaz made her his wife. Although there was another kinsman-redeemer, he wasn't interested in fulfilling his obligations. Boaz was willing to step in and fulfill the role.

In chapter 1, Ruth didn't know Boaz existed. In chapter 2, he was merely a benefactor but became a protector. In chapter 3, she initiated a relationship with him. In chapter 4, Boaz secured her future by going to the city gate and taking the necessary steps to fulfill his role. If there was ever a "Cinderella meets the prince" story in Scripture, this is it.

Ruth and Boaz later had a son, Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Because she chose the difficult path, to remain faithful to her mother-in-law in her time of need, Ruth became the great-grandmother of David, for which the sleepy little town of Bethlehem became famous. And many years later, Ruth would also become part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1).

Ruth shows us that we can face unexpected grief and an uncertain future with courage, knowing that our heavenly Father cares for us and that He brings life out of death. Faith demands courage. It takes risks and acts according to God's Word. And in doing so, the steadfast, the faithful, the courageous are able to align their stories with God's greater plan.

I strongly believe that the stories of Esther, Joseph, and Ruth were written just for us, to inspire us and strengthen our resolve. But those stories aren't just found in the Bible. Those stories are all around us. God is still helping unlikely heroes to overcome and alter the course of humanity for the better.

Several years ago I met one such hero at a conference in New Mexico. Rose is a Navajo Indian whose name means "taking my time to be born." She is more than a survivor; she is an overcomer. She blossoms in the desert, reflecting the abundance of Christ on a Navajo reservation. Her friends and family call her "Lady Moses."

Rose's parents were alcoholics, and her mother died when she was thirteen years old. On March 4, 1964, she and her eight-year-old sister set out to find the home of an aunt and uncle, having no idea a blizzard was approaching. The girls were dropped off at a bus stop and began walking. Along the road the blizzard hit full force. The girls were not dressed for such extreme weather, and Rose's sister died during the night. The next day their uncle's dogs found Rose and her deceased sister in a four-foot snow bank.

Rose said, "My whole body was frozen. When I was cold and asleep, I heard a voice in my ear. I saw a board shape in a picture frame with something written on it. It said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' I had never seen that verse before. I had never read a Bible" (see Acts 16:31).

She was in a coma for three days, not knowing her sister was dead. In total, she was hospitalized for two and a half months because of severe frostbite in her feet. One Friday during that time, Rose overheard a doctor saying they were going to amputate her foot. Up until that point, she had a cover over her legs and had not looked at them. When she looked at her left foot, it was the size of a football. As Rose lay back on her pillow, she prayed in her native language, "God, you have saved my life from the cold, cold weather. I accept You. I want to follow You no matter what it takes. I will walk with You. I really believe. Please heal my foot." By Sunday when the doctor checked her foot, it was healed.

After she got out of the hospital, she lived with her aunt and uncle, but they did not support her embracing the "white man's religion." Eventually she was evicted from her aunt and uncle's home, but the pastor of the church, a Southern Baptist missionary, took her in.

Rose has never married. She says, "My ministry is to the Navajo." She is still on the reservation, pointing her people toward Christ. She teaches a weekly class to Navajo women and teenagers because she wants them to be able to read the Bible in their native language. Rose spends many of her days going door-to-door to share the love of Christ. Because of her faithful witness, Rose's father came to saving faith in Christ, and many of her family members now know the Lord. She continues to pass her faith along by recording the New Testament in Navajo.<sup>3</sup>

Esther was an orphaned Jewish girl. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Ruth followed a bitter mother-in-law into strange territory. Rose was left to fend for herself in the freezing cold. It's safe to say they knew what it was like to face the unknown. They could have easily focused on the fear of the situation.

*Who's going to take care of me?*

*What if no one likes me?*

*Where will I live?*

*Will I ever be happy again?*

But they didn't. They took one small step of faith at a time and stood firm against fear.

Through faith, Esther saved the Jews from annihilation, and Joseph rescued his family from famine. Ruth became part of the lineage of Christ, and Rose has led countless Navajo people to Christ. These young people not only had happy endings to their own stories, but they also changed the course of life for so many of those around them. Best of all, they have left behind their stories by which we can model our own lives.

You're young. You've got a lot of life ahead of you, and only God knows what it holds. Chances are there will be heartbreak and joy, weeping and shouting, feast and famine. The sole certainty of your future is its uncertainty. And that's where courage kicks in. The courageous move forward, despite uncertainty, and hold tight to God's promise of protection and provision.

That means you.

Walk on, my friend. He is by your side.

## — Think Courageously —

1. What plans do you have for your future? Tomorrow? Next week? Next year?
2. What are some steps you could take to ensure those plans will happen?
3. Do you believe those plans align with God's plans for you? Why or why not?

4. What do you think God has planned for your life?
5. Name one thing you can do to strengthen your faith in God's plans for your life.

## Section 1 Recap

Joshua trusted God to \_\_\_\_\_.

Abraham trusted God to \_\_\_\_\_.

Esther trusted God to \_\_\_\_\_.

Ruth trusted God to \_\_\_\_\_.

I can trust God to \_\_\_\_\_.

To be courageous, you must learn to trust God.

## Section 2: Courageous Leadership

Courage and strength  
are grounded in  
an ongoing  
relationship  
with God.



# *THE SCRIPT*

## **-COURAGE AND STRENGTH-**

**INT. DYLAN'S ROOM. DAYTIME.**

ADAM enters the room and sits beside DYLAN, who is playing video games.

**DYLAN**

How'd you get in here?

**ADAM**

I know how to open a locked door.

**DYLAN**

You calling me or something?

**ADAM**

I just want to see how you're doing.

**DYLAN**

Is *anybody* doing okay around here?

**ADAM**

Is there anything you want to talk about?

**DYLAN**

Why do you wanna talk? Everyone who comes into this house just keeps saying the same thing over and over.

**ADAM**

They're just trying to help, son.

**DYLAN**

They're not.

**ADAM**

Dylan, we're all hurting. What we can't do is block each other out. We need each other.

# ***The Scripture***

## **God Instills Courage and Strength**

*After the death of Moses the LORD's servant, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, who had served Moses: "Moses My servant is dead. Now you and all the people prepare to cross over the Jordan to the land I am giving the Israelites. I have given you every place where the sole of your foot treads, just as I promised Moses. Your territory will be from the wilderness and Lebanon to the great Euphrates River—all the land of the Hittites—and west to the Mediterranean Sea. No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. I will be with you, just as I was with Moses. I will not leave you or forsake you.*

*"Be strong and courageous, for you will distribute the land I swore to their fathers to give them as an inheritance. Above all, be strong and very courageous to carefully observe the whole instruction My servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go. This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to recite it day and night so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do. Haven't I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."*

Joshua 1:1–9

## CHAPTER 3

# The Courage to Lead on All Levels

“Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

JOSHUA 1:9

*“He should call out his children to become responsible men and women, who’ll live their lives for what matters in eternity.”*

—ADAM MITCHELL, *COURAGEOUS*

**J**oshua is one of the greatest generals of all time. His leadership abilities and military strategy are still studied today. Joshua was born into slavery in Egypt but eventually commanded the army of the Lord and was chosen by God to lead after Moses died. Most people begin studying Joshua’s life with the book that bears his name, but there’s so much more. Long before he was the leader, he had a record of obedient service and strong faith.

Joshua was willing to stand against the majority. He was undaunted by the unbelief of his peers. He was unwavering in his commitment to take the Promised Land. He was fearless in battle, and he was a godly man at home. Joshua was the total package, a man’s man.

God’s call to be courageous is undeniable. How we respond to that call determines both our future and our legacy. Young men and women who know they are walking in the will of God, by the power of God, are invincible. We need mighty warriors like these who will step up to the demands of the times because they are sure of God’s call on their lives.

Joshua believed God’s promise that the Israelites could and would take the land that lay ahead of them. Joshua was, in every sense of the word,

filled with God, led by God, and obedient to the will of God (Josh. 1:1–9). If he hadn't been, Joshua would have likely failed.

Moses, the great leader up to this point, had just died, leaving Joshua to lead the way. Some leaders in Joshua's shoes would look at such a crisis and say, "All is lost! There's no hope now!" But God didn't send Joshua a suggestion. He gave him direct orders: "Be strong and courageous." With the command came a promise: God would supply all that was needed for Joshua to be a great leader.

I believe that promise is for us all.

From the halls of the high school to the halls of Congress, we are in need of strong leaders. This is no time for wimps or the weak. Our strength is not in ourselves but in the Lord. We will die just as we live. If we live as cowards, we will die as cowards. If we live courageously, we will die courageously. We want our military leaders to be courageous on the battlefield. We want our friends to be courageous when facing peer pressure. We need courage to choose between good, better, and best. We need courage to stand against the status quo.

Where are the people setting that example? Across the pews of America's churches, I find the average congregation is aging, declining, and dying. Why aren't we stepping up to the plate? Where are those who are passionate for faith? Where are the students of the Word? Where are the people of prayer?

Joshua knew he wasn't going to just waltz into the Promised Land. The enemy wasn't going to lay out the welcome mat and run for the hills. No, there would be battles. This command and the promise connected to it came right when Joshua needed to hear it: "Be strong; do not be afraid." God's commands are God's enablement. Joshua's courage wasn't worked up; it came straight from God.

The truly courageous figure God into their calculations. God is a part of their daily life. They don't only search for Him in a crisis. Or on Sundays. They live with a constant awareness of the promise, "I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you." We are not alone in the battles, and we do not have to face the enemy in our own strength.

Dawson Trotman said, "Think! You can do a lot more than you realize." I see unrealized potential in many people today. I remember

hearing John Madden, a legendary leader in the NFL, say, “Potential means you haven’t done it yet.”

Joshua realized his potential. Have you begun to realize yours? Joshua understood potential is only realized when there is preparation. Joshua made the necessary preparations to cross over and take the land that was promised (Josh. 3:5–7, 17).

Joshua’s courage gave others courage. His courage gave the priests courage to lead the way, to step into a flooded, rushing river. Human reasoning would put the archers, not the priests, at the front of battle. But Joshua wasn’t depending on human reasoning to lead the way.

Lloyd John Ogilvie, in his book *Lord of the Impossible*, describes the scene:

To promise that all that water would be stopped up was quite a promise. Imagine the courage required. The Lord of the impossible had decided to make his miracle dependent on the priests getting their feet wet. Put yourself in the skin of one of those priests as, early in the morning, you shoulder the ark and move down toward that overflowing river. Now feel the strange mixture of panic and promise in your heart when the moment of decision comes. One step farther and your feet will get wet. I’ve always imagined that the courage needed to take that step came from the ark itself. Two parts of it would have to be daring and nerve. Inside it were the tablets on which the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Sinai, were carved. On top was the mercy seat, recalling the forgiving, atoning love of Yahweh. Surely these priests claimed both the covenant of commandments and the mercy of the Lord as they contemplated the awesome step of faith. There was no turning back. God and the people depended on them.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

The river was at flood stage. Fear would have whispered, “You’ll be washed away. You’ll forever be remembered as the guys who lost the ark and the Ten Commandments.” It takes courage to step into the water in a flood. But they led the way with courageous faith. One day they were in the wilderness; the next day they were in the Promised Land.

Joshua and his army had to fight as if it all depended on them. Spurgeon said, “The best and wisest thing in the world is to work as if it all depended upon you, and then trust in God, knowing that it all depends on him.”<sup>2</sup> Joshua was a great leader because he was a great follower. He understood duty and obedience. He knew there was an unseen hand guiding him and that God’s judgment was better than his own reasoning.

Who on earth would try to defeat a mighty city just by walking around the walls?

Only a man who had heard from God.

After the people of God had crossed over the Jordan, Joshua went out to evaluate the situation (Josh. 5:13–15). Joshua was a general, but he bowed before the Captain of the Lord of Hosts who was none other than a manifestation of Christ Himself. The Captain let the general know He was ready to defend His people. And Joshua was happy to follow orders from the Captain.

Many people are too big for God to use; they are too full of themselves. We’ve heard so much about positive thinking and being independent that we don’t know how to depend on God. Yet Joshua’s ability to conquer resulted from having been conquered by God.

Leaders rise to the occasion. In reality, courageous leaders like Joshua rise to the top because they’ve learned to bend their knees to God. There are no shortcuts to spirituality. There’s no pill for courage. It is developed and defined in the quiet places with God.

Do you allow time to hear from God? Do you feel like God doesn’t speak to you, that you never get answers from Him? If so, how are you listening? Do you make time daily to spend with God?

It’s just like anything else: do you read the directions before playing a game or using a new electronic device? Sure, you can probably get by without it. But there are likely more features than you know about, and there’s likely a more efficient way to do it. God knows that way. If you take time to listen to His directions, both through the explicit directions He’s given us in His Word and through daily time just seeking Him, you’re much more likely to experience life the way God intended it.

Throughout the history of His people, God has proven Himself sufficient. He never fails. He’s there and He is able. Life’s battles have a

spiritual side. Job never knew about the conversation in heaven between God and the devil. Jesus had to inform Peter that Satan had desired to sift him.

As leaders and warriors, we are asked to dress daily in the full armor of God. That armor is a heavenly resource made available to us, for us to use in battle. Yet our strategies must be surrendered to the Lord's strategies. The battles belong to the Lord. It has been said that Joshua set his thinking according to the mind of God just as we set our watches according to the sun.<sup>3</sup>

Joshua is an example of what God can do with one person who has the courage to follow wholeheartedly. His name means "Jehovah is salvation" or "Jehovah saves." He had courage because he placed his confidence in God. D. L. Moody said, "Courage is necessary in Christian work. I have yet to find a man who is easily discouraged that amounts to anything anywhere."

The Scriptures tell us "the fear of man is a snare" (Prov. 29:25). We are told to "fear not." Jesus said, "Don't be afraid." Paul wrote, "For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment" (2 Tim. 1:7).

Leadership has nothing to do with your disposition, but everything to do with understanding your position in Christ. If you are praying for courage, do you think God will give you courage or put you in a situation where you'll have the opportunity to be courageous? You'll never know if you have courage until you are willing to be tested.

We need a new generation of courageous leaders. One day I looked around and realized the church I pastor was getting gray. We began intentionally to invest in younger men. We are seeing the blessings of that decision. Young people are rising up. From middle school to midlife, I'm grateful for what I see happening in our church.

The Lord said to Joshua, "I have handed Jericho . . . over to you" (Josh. 6:2). Who among us would be willing to ask God to give us the city or the community where we live, into our hands? There's a price to pay; the price is surrender and demands obedience.

Fear of failure, fear of society, and fear of consequences will keep us crammed in a corner. It's going to take courage for you to step out of the



box that the world wants to put you in.

Do you want to walk in victory? It's going to take faith. Faithfulness in little things will open the door for bigger things. If you want to realize your full potential, you can't look for the cheap seats and the shallow end of the pool. You've got to step in, step out, and step up! That will take nothing less than courage.

Joshua was a great leader for several reasons. He faced every crisis head-on. In his speech before Parliament on June 4, 1940, Winston Churchill said, "Whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." Joshua, too, understood that the obstacles and oppositions he would face would be unique.

He didn't plot out the whole war. He took one city at a time and trusted God for a wide array of battle tactics. Joshua learned well by listening to and observing Moses. "The LORD your God is the One who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory" (Deut. 20:4).

Just like Moses, Joshua would not compromise. The phrase "as for me" appears twenty-one times in the book of Joshua. It's a statement of courage and commitment. It's a call to renounce anything secondary and superficial. At the end of his life, Joshua was still calling the people to make solid decisions to serve the Lord.

Joshua also understood the consequences of his decisions. In chapter 24, you'll find Joshua never took credit for his success. He gave the credit and glory to God. Courageous leaders don't need applause, attention, or medals. In his farewell address Joshua reminded the people of the importance of their decisions. He knew that if you don't make the right choice, you'll suffer the consequences.

He made a famous speech at Shechem, a place where Abraham and Jacob had been. There the people recommitted themselves to the Lord after entering the land (see Josh. 8). Afterward, Joshua took them to a place of renewal and defining moments and said, "You've got some decisions to make."

Joshua stated his family's position. He didn't ask for a vote on it. He didn't take a straw poll. Joshua spoke as the head of his home and declare that they would serve the Lord (see Josh. 24:14).

Do your friends know who you serve? Do they know what principles you stand for? Do they know what gives you courage? In order for you to lead, your friends, your family, your youth group will need to know where you're going. They'll need to know what they're fighting for. They'll need to know why it's worth it.

In the movie *Courageous*, the principal men in the film make a resolution to be the spiritual leaders in their homes. They declare in front of their families and friends:

I do solemnly resolve before God to take full responsibility for myself, my wife, and my children. I will love them, protect them, and serve them and teach them the statutes of God as the spiritual leader of my home. I will be faithful to my wife, to love and honor her and be willing to lay down my life for her, as Christ did for me. I will teach my children to love God with all their hearts, minds, and strength and will train them to honor authority and live responsibly. I will confront evil, pursue justice, and love mercy and will treat others with kindness, respect, and compassion. I will work diligently to provide for the needs of my family and will speak truthfully and keep my promises. I will forgive those who have wronged me and reconcile with those I have wronged. I will walk in integrity as a man answerable to God and will seek to honor God, obey His Word, and do His will. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

These men were well into adulthood, some with children your age, when they made this resolution. Imagine the impact on your friends, on your family, on your future if you resolved to be a courageous leader *right now*.

Not long ago I shared this message with the members of Sherwood and said, "I stand as a pastor and father, challenging you to follow God though none go with you. You and I can't worship the one true God and worship something or someone else" (see Josh. 24:14). What we worship is what we spend our time thinking about. That's why the battle in the New Testament is in the mind. We must renew our minds and think on these things because God has called us to think differently than the world thinks. But until right

stands up and looks like right, then wrong doesn't take it into consideration."

The teenage world is tough. Ideas, thoughts, and standards—many of them less than godly—are bombarding you from all directions. Society, celebrities, and reality shows tell you that you're supposed to look this way, dress this way, act this way. But do you really want to be society's idea of "normal"? I don't think so. That's why it's vitally important to start with you. *You* take control of the thoughts and ideas that enter your mind. You stand up for what's right.

Your friends, younger kids in school, your siblings—they look up to you, whether you know it or not. They're looking for someone, anyone, to lead them, to set the standard. What kind of standard, what kind of ideas, are they getting from you?

Does it mean you have to be perfect? Of course not. In fact, every time you mess up, you also have a chance to model repentance and grace. But it does mean that starting with you, there's a new standard: a standard for what's right. The way you dress, the way you talk, the way you treat others is all an attempt to follow the one standard we are all striving for—the standard of Christ.

Your friends, your school, maybe even your family needs a Joshua—right now. They need someone to lead them to do the unlikely, to go where no one else dares, to step into the fullness of God's promises for them. That was the cry of Joshua's heart in his last sermon.

This is not a dress rehearsal. The battles are real. The demands are great.

Yet the opportunity to make a difference is immeasurable.

The time is now: choose *this day* whom you will serve.

It won't be easy. But courageous leaders already know that. Joshua knew that getting those grumbling Israelites into the Promised Land would be like herding cats, but he also stood in the light of God's promise. Wherever that light led, Joshua followed.

Being a courageous leader is simply being a follower of Christ. Follow His lead, take a stand for His way, and you'll lead others to the light.

— Think Courageously —

1. Using your concordance or an online Bible site, spend some time reading what the Bible says about *courage*. How does this help you to be a courageous leader?
2. Make a Joshua-like commitment by filling in the blank: “As for me, \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. Who is one person at school in need of a courageous leader? At church? At home?
4. Think of a situation at school or at home where a courageous leader was needed. How would a courageous leader change the outcome?
5. Think of one thing that you can do to take a stand, to be a leader. Do it today.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Courage to Be a Humble Hero

“The LORD turned to him and said, ‘Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?’”

JUDGES 6:14

*“I am very grateful to have a job here, but I cannot do what you have asked of me. Because it is wrong. I cannot dishonor my God or my family by lying on the report.”*

—JAVIER MARTINEZ, *COURAGEOUS*

**A**s much as we need constant leaders, we also need those willing to go the extra mile. We need heroes. If we are going to see significant change in our lifetime, we must stop hiding in fear. We have an incredible opportunity to make an impact if we don’t lose our way.

Who knows, a hero may be hiding inside of you.

Most people we call heroes never view themselves that way. They didn’t get up one morning and decide, “Today I will be a hero.” But their stories fill the pages of history.

In our lifetime, the heroes of September 11 stand out as some of the most remarkable. You may not remember the events as they unfolded on that day, but you’ve no doubt heard the stories of the heroes. Some tried to take over the cockpit of an airplane, uttering the unforgettable words, “Let’s roll!” That phrase still reminds us of common people turned heroes who will be remembered in history books. Firemen and police officers ran into the World Trade Center to face a dangerous task, reminding us that public servants across the country who risk their lives on a daily basis are some of our greatest unsung heroes. Hundreds of them died that day, doing their jobs, trying to save lives, and hoping to make a difference.

Every single day, there are heroes on the battlefield, heroes in natural disasters, heroes in our schools.

Still, we need more.

With the movie *Courageous*, we call men to be heroes, to be men of honor for their wives and children. But the call doesn't end there. There is a hero inside every single one of us—a hero who is being strengthened, taught, and readied for that opportunity when he or she will stand alone for what is right.

The heroes in my life are men and women from all walks of life; you've never heard of most of them. My dad was a hero, but probably fewer than five hundred people ever knew his name. He was a hero in his high school as one of the best athletes to ever play football or basketball, and some of his records still stand sixty years later. He served in World War II with the atomic bomb squadron. I have pictures of him standing by the *Enola Gay* when Colonel Paul Tibbets brought her home after dropping the first atomic bomb.

When my daughter Hayley was in high school, she wrote a paper about my dad. We contacted Colonel Tibbets to see if he remembered my dad. I can still remember his response: "He was an American hero." The weight of his statement stunned me. My dad never saw himself as a hero. He was just doing his job and serving his country, handpicked by Colonel Tibbets to be part of a highly secretive group of men.

So what are the prerequisites to being a hero? Do you have to be a strapping soldier or a legendary genius? Let's see what Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Brothers, consider your calling: Not many are wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one can boast in His presence. (1 Cor. 1:26–29)

Our hero qualities have very little to do with our abilities. God raises up people to achieve His purposes. They would not choose themselves for such a task, but God sees something in them and calls them out. Most of us would not consider ourselves to be heroes, but God has chosen us, handpicked us to be His servants. God has a way of taking nobodies and making them into somebodies through the power of Jesus Christ.

One of the great lessons believers have to learn is our strengths are no help to God and our weaknesses are not a hindrance. John Blanchard says, “God thinks most of the man who thinks of himself least.” Take Gideon for example.

Gideon was a young man who was totally convinced he was a nobody. Today he’s considered a hero. God is not looking for talent or personality; He’s looking for someone He can trust with great responsibilities. He looks for those who will give Him glory. Humility is not thinking poorly of oneself, but rather it means not thinking of oneself at all.

Have you ever read the book of Judges? I’ll just tell you: it is depressing. The fact that such a book would follow the triumphant story of Joshua is a sad testimony to a generation that decided defeat and defiance was better than victory and obedience. A generation arose that did not know God, just two generations removed from the days of Joshua.

They quickly forgot the God that delivered them into the Promised Land. They compromised, fell into sin, and were ultimately bound in servitude. While in bondage they prayed for a deliverer but never appointed one. God always chose the one who would lead, and Gideon is one of the judges God raised up in a time of crisis.

Gary Inrig, in his book *Hearts of Iron Feet of Clay*, writes, “One of the great truths of Scripture is that when God looks at us, He does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as He works in our lives. Other people look at us and see our flaws and failings. God looks at us and sees our possibilities, through His transforming presence.”<sup>1</sup> I often tell people who are down on themselves, “God wants for you what you would want for yourself if you had enough faith and sense to want it.” And it’s true.

You should find great encouragement in the story of Gideon. God is in the business of making nobodies into somebodies. Don’t let others tell you what you can be; let God tell you. When I first started in the ministry, the

pastor of my home church told me I should never expect to do anything “great” because I was more of a “behind-the-scenes supporter” than a leader. He encouraged me to “settle.” Maybe I was a late bloomer, but I knew I wanted to make a difference with my life.

When my dad died, we were gathered at the funeral home for visitation. My Aunt Hazel was there. I wish you could have met Aunt Hazel (not really). I don’t ever remember her smiling; she had the spiritual gift of discouragement. (Oh wait, that’s not a spiritual gift, is it?) Aunt Hazel walked up to two of the ladies on our staff and asked them who all the people were at the funeral. They told her many were members of Sherwood. She seemed stunned and asked, “How many members are in that church?” When they replied, “Three thousand,” she quickly responded, “Hum! I never thought that boy would amount to anything.” So much for family support!

I’ll bet you have an Aunt Hazel. There’s someone who always tells you what you can’t do, what you could never do. Don’t listen to her. Your Aunt Hazel never did anything with her life, so don’t let her put you in the same box.

The Scriptures provide accounts of men and women who seemed insignificant on the surface, but they were important enough to be included in God’s Word. Men like Shamgar, who is mentioned only twice in the book of Judges. “After Ehud, Shamgar son of Anath became judge. He delivered Israel by striking down 600 Philistines with an oxgoad” (3:31). We know little about this man, but we do know he used an agricultural instrument, the “oxgoad,” to save Israel. God took note of him.

No one initially tagged Gideon as a great leader. He was probably the last person people expected to be called to greatness by God. The full account of his encounter with God is told in Judges 6, but take note of the interchange.

The Angel of the LORD came, and He sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash, the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was threshing wheat in the wine vat in order to hide it from the Midianites. Then the Angel of the LORD appeared to him and said: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”



Gideon said to Him, “Please Sir, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened? And where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about? They said, ‘Hasn’t the LORD brought us out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian.”

The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?”

He said to Him, “Please, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Look, my family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.”

“But I will be with you,” the LORD said to him. “You will strike Midian down as if it were one man.” (Judg. 6:11–16)

Gideon tried really hard *not* to be a hero. He had all kinds of excuses for God. But there was one fact Gideon couldn’t argue: God said, “But I will be with you.” With that one statement, all of our excuses disappear. We all become likely heroes.

Gideon didn’t run up and volunteer to lead an army. He was hiding, a coward who would, over the course of time, become courageous. At first we are struck by Gideon’s hesitancy and fear. Yet when the Angel of the Lord appeared, He called this coward a “valiant warrior.” The expression refers to brave soldiers who marched into the teeth of the enemy. It’s a word for a hero, a person who shows remarkable courage. God wasn’t being sarcastic; rather He was looking through the long lens of eternity. God could see Gideon and what he would become. It was a heavenly evaluation. God saw something in Gideon that Gideon didn’t see in himself.

Gideon responded with words of unbelief. Over and over he uttered words like *if*, *why*, *where*, *but*, and *how*. In response to all his questions and concerns, God said, “Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?” God didn’t tell Gideon to go in his own power. He told him to go in the power of God, for God was with him and would be with him.

Maybe fear weakened Gideon. Fear of fighting. Fear of dying. Fear of the unknown. Regardless, courage certainly didn’t define him at this point in his life.

The list of phobias in this world is endless. There are the more common phobias like arachnophobia, the fear of spiders, or pteromerhanophobia, the fear of flying, and then the outright strange phobias like halitophobia, the fear of bad breath, or megalophobia, the fear of oversized objects, or even phobophobia, the fear of having a phobia!

Fearful people are often indecisive, and this seemed to be the case with Gideon. But God has a way of taking indecision and turning it into acts of heroism. It begins with an encounter with God. God didn't just see who Gideon was at the moment, but He also saw who he could be wholly yielded and surrendered. In fact, I find some sanctified humor in God finding a man who was hiding and giving him an army that had to be dwindled down to a few hundred. God wanted Gideon to move from fear to faith, from cowardice to courage.

God wasn't trying to prop Gideon up. He wasn't trying to boost his self-confidence. He was reminding him that provision had already been made to meet the demands.

God's power transforms us into something we could never be on our own, and His Word is His promise. For example:

- What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom. 8:31)
- I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:13)
- For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. (2 Tim. 1:7)

It's hard to remain cowardly when we hide those verses in our hearts.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "Like Gideon, we are prone to argue with God and try to convince Him that His statement of our potential is greatly exaggerated. Moses took that approach when God called him (Exod. 3–4), and so did young Jeremiah (Jer. 1); but both of them finally gave in and surrendered to the Lord's will. It's a good thing they did, because that was the making of them."<sup>2</sup>

No matter your weaknesses, God is committed to His plan for your life. We do not need self-help, self-confidence, or a pat on the back. We need to

appropriate our confidence in the greatness of our God.

In 2000 our family visited England and Scotland. On that trip we met an incredible man named Colin Peckham who took us on a tour of Edinburgh. As we walked along, he pointed out the grave of John Knox. We also toured the Knox home and walked down to Holyrood Palace. As Colin told the story of John Knox and his boldness, his eyes brightened, and his voice resounded with power, recalling a day when a single man stood for what was right. Because of John Knox, Scotland experienced the Reformation.

Colin recounted the familiar story of Knox being a prisoner on a slave ship because he would not submit to the established Catholic Church and because he preached repentance, even to Mary Queen of Scots. One day someone brought him a wooden image of the Virgin Mary and demanded he kiss it. Knox refused, grabbed the statue, and threw it overboard. Then he shouted, "Let her save herself! She is light enough; let her learn to swim." That one act of courage propelled Knox to the forefront of the Reformation.

Courage is not courage until it is put to the test. Hudson Taylor said, "All of God's great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them; they counted on His faithfulness."<sup>3</sup> Because of his stand, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. An army was assembled numbering thirty-two thousand, but on paper they were no match for the enemy army numbering 135,000. The odds were impossible. No one would have bet on Gideon except God Himself. In fact, God was so sure of the outcome that He had Gideon cut the army down to three hundred.

I've visited the site of this historic victory and the springs several times. It's incredible to stand there and think of what happened on that day when God showed up and showed out. The 135,000 were camped to the North. Between the two armies were a valley and the spring of Harod. At the spring God began the process of dissolving the great army and reminded Gideon that power and courage and victory are from the Lord alone. Gideon had too many soldiers, and God knew they would take credit for the victory. Twenty-two thousand left in fear, but God wasn't finished. There was another test.

Then the LORD said to Gideon, “There are still too many people. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. If I say to you, ‘This one can go with you,’ he can go. But if I say about anyone, ‘This one cannot go with you,’ he cannot go.” So he brought the people down to the water, and the LORD said to Gideon, “Separate everyone who laps water with his tongue like a dog. Do the same with everyone who kneels to drink.” The number of those who lapped with their hands to their mouths was 300 men, and all the rest of the people knelt to drink water. The LORD said to Gideon, “I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and hand the Midianites over to you. But everyone else is to go home.” So Gideon sent all the Israelites to their tents but kept the 300, who took the people’s provisions and their trumpets. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley. (Judg. 7:4–8)

Gideon was looking for fighters while God was looking for faith. The men chosen were the ones who left one hand free and two eyes open. Some of us are too big for God to use. We are proud of our strengths, gifts, talents, and personality. But God is looking for desperation, brokenness, humility, faith, and obedience, and He shares His glory with no one.

God had instructed His people regarding courage in Deuteronomy 20: “When you go out to war against your enemies and see horses, chariots, and an army larger than yours, do not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, is with you. . . . Do not be cowardly. Do not be afraid, alarmed, or terrified because of them. For the LORD your God is the One who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory” (vv. 1, 3–4).

If fear is contagious, the same is true of courage. Fear focuses on the obstacles; courage focuses on the opportunity. Fear sees with eyes of flesh; courage sees with eyes of faith. This test of drinking from the spring was a test of courage. Gideon was instructed to watch the men as they drank, and only three hundred kept their eyes on the enemy. Oliver Cromwell once likened his New Model Army to Gideon’s. He said, “Three hundred good men and true with fear of God in them is better than 10,000 swept together by chance conscription or picked up for a shilling a head in the public house.”

When Gideon and his men perhaps should have been afraid, the Midianites were actually afraid. In the end it was God versus 135,000, and the 135,000 didn't have a chance. Gideon and his band of brothers were merely instruments in the hands of God.

This incredible account reminds us that God is not looking for great people; He's looking for available people who will follow Him. Victory comes by faith. God is not limited to your abilities or your reasoning. It only takes one person full of the Spirit to make a difference. One writer said, "Not only because they fight more bravely, or that they obey orders more promptly, but because God is pleased to vindicate such a company, no matter how small, because its only hope for victory in the conflict lies with him. He will not have us boasting that we have saved ourselves by our own strength. But his delight is to have his people celebrating victories won against all human odds because he has been their deliverer."

Regarding faith, Ron Dunn writes,

We can divide faith into three categories. First, there is the kind of faith that says, "God can." We believe God can do anything. Nothing is too hard for Him . . . but this is not victorious faith of which the Bible speaks. It is passive and accomplishes nothing. Then there is faith that says, "God will." This is better, but still short of the biblical ideal. . . . The faith described in Hebrews 11:1 believes beyond God can and God will. It believes God has. This kind of faith declares it already done. Instead of waiting for God to create the provision, it steps into the provision already available. . . . Anyone can believe he has something after he receives it. That's walking by sight, not by faith. Biblical faith is believing you have something before you have it. You believe you have it because God says you have it and not because you see it in your hand.<sup>4</sup>

In light of those words, read carefully these promises to Gideon:

- The LORD is with you, mighty warrior. (Judg. 6:12)
- The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?" (Judg. 6:14)

- “But I will be with you,” the LORD said to him. “You will strike Midian down as if it were one man.” (Judg. 6:16)
- The LORD said to Gideon, “I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and hand the Midianites over to you. But everyone else is to go home.” (Judg. 7:7)
- That night the LORD said to him, “Get up and go into the camp, for I have given it into your hand.” (Judg. 7:9)

Are you facing overwhelming odds? Does it seem you are outnumbered? Do you feel inferior or helpless or inconsequential? Be strong. Take courage. Let the Spirit of God through the Word of God empower you and embolden you.

If you’re young, weak, unwise, and fearful—even better.  
God can make a hero out of you.

## — Think Courageously —

1. Who are some of your heroes?
2. Name one thing that makes them a hero.
3. If God called you to be a hero, what are some of the excuses you would have for Him?
4. What does God’s Word say to those excuses?
5. Look back at one of the verses on page 58. Write that verse on a piece of paper. Frame it. Decorate it. Hang it where you can see it. Use it to awaken the hero inside of you.

## Section 2 Recap

Joshua found courage through \_\_\_\_\_.

Joshua gained strength by \_\_\_\_\_.

Gideon found courage through \_\_\_\_\_.

Gideon gained strength by \_\_\_\_\_.

I can find courage through \_\_\_\_\_.

I can gain strength by \_\_\_\_\_.

Courage and strength are grounded in an ongoing  
relationship with God.

## Section 3: Courageous Priorities

The courageous live  
a life of obedience,  
doing what is right,  
no matter what.



# *THE SCRIPT*

## **-OBEDIENCE-**

**INT. FINE RESTAURANT – EVENING**

JADE and NATHAN sit a table.

**JADE**

(looking around, in a hushed voice) Wow, Daddy, this place is nice. Isn't it expensive?

**NATHAN**

Well, tonight's a special night. It's worth it to me.

**JADE**

What's so special about tonight?

**NATHAN**

Jade, I brought you here tonight because I wanted to tell you how grateful I am that God gave you to me. I see my daughter becoming a beautiful young woman. And I can understand how any young man would be drawn to you.

But I would also like for you to know that as your father, I want the very, very best for you. One day I'll give you away to another man, and I want that man to love God more than anything, because if he does, then he'll love you.

JADE nods.

**NATHAN (CONT'D)**

And I know how young men think: they wanna win your heart, but they don't know how to treasure it. So I would like to make an agreement with you.

**JADE**

(hushed) Okay.

**NATHAN**

Jade, if you'll trust me with your heart and allow me to approve any young man that desires to have more than a friendship with you, I promise to take

care of you and give you my full blessing when God shows us the right one.

**JADE**

Okay. (nodding, smiling) I will.

# ***The Scripture***

## **Joshua Obeys in the Midst of Trouble**

*The Israelites, however, were unfaithful regarding the things set apart for destruction. Achan son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of what was set apart, and the LORD's anger burned against the Israelites.*

*Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and told them, "Go up and scout the land." So the men went up and scouted Ai.*

*After returning to Joshua they reported to him, "Don't send all the people, but send about 2,000 or 3,000 men to attack Ai. Since the people of Ai are so few, don't wear out all our people there." So about 3,000 men went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. The men of Ai struck down about 36 of them and chased them from outside the gate to the quarries, striking them down on the descent. As a result, the people's hearts melted and became like water.*

*Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell before the ark of the LORD with his face to the ground until evening, as did the elders of Israel; they all put dust on their heads. "Oh, Lord GOD," Joshua said, "why did You ever bring these people across the Jordan to hand us over to the Amorites for our destruction? If only we had been content to remain on the other side of the Jordan! What can I say, Lord, now that Israel has turned its back and run from its enemies? When the Canaanites and all who live in the land hear about this, they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. Then what will You do about Your great name?"*

*The LORD then said to Joshua, "Stand up! Why are you on the ground? Israel has sinned. They have violated My covenant that I appointed for them. They have taken some of what was set apart. They have stolen, deceived, and put the things with their own belongings. This is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies. They will turn their backs and*

*run from their enemies, because they have been set apart for destruction. I will no longer be with you unless you remove from you what is set apart.*

*“Go and consecrate the people. Tell them to consecrate themselves for tomorrow, for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There are things that are set apart among you, Israel. You will not be able to stand against your enemies until you remove what is set apart. In the morning you must present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe the LORD selects is to come forward clan by clan. The clan the LORD selects is to come forward family by family. The family the LORD selects is to come forward man by man. The one who is caught with the things set apart must be burned, along with everything he has, because he has violated the LORD’s covenant and committed an outrage in Israel.”*

*Joshua got up early the next morning. He had Israel come forward tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was selected. He had the clans of Judah come forward, and the Zerahite clan was selected. He had the Zerahite clan come forward by heads of families, and Zabdi was selected. He then had Zabdi’s family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was selected.*

*So Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and make a confession to Him. I urge you, tell me what you have done. Don’t hide anything from me.”*

*Achan replied to Joshua, “It is true. I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel.”*

Joshua 7:1–20

## CHAPTER 5

# The Courage to Make Up Your Mind

“Then Elijah approached all the people and said, ‘How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Him. But if Baal, follow him.’”

1 KINGS 18:21

*“I struggled with who I was my whole childhood. I almost got in a gang myself.”*

—NATHAN HAYES, *COURAGEOUS*

**I**magine you’re nineteen years old, critically wounded, and dying in the jungles of Vietnam. Your infantry unit is outnumbered eight to one, and the enemy fire is so intense that your infantry commander has ordered the medevac helicopters to stop coming in.

As you lie on the ground, you know in your heart you aren’t getting out. Your family is twelve thousand miles away, and you’ll never see them again. Suddenly you hear the faint sound of an approaching helicopter. You look up and see it’s an unarmed Huey without any medevac markings on it. The pilot is not part of the medevac unit, so this isn’t in his job description, but he flies into the fire anyway. He lands in the middle of the battle and loads you on board to rescue you out of the gunfire.

My guess is that you’d be pretty happy to see that guy.

The pilot’s name was Ed Freeman, and he kept coming back, a total of thirteen times. He rescued nearly thirty wounded warriors who would have otherwise died on the battlefield. Freeman later received the Medal of Honor for his outstanding heroism.

Ed Freeman had a choice. Stick to his role as a pilot. Or use his abilities to save the wounded. He is evidence enough that one brave man can make a difference.

In 1 Kings 18 we see the difference one godly person can make: “Elijah is here!” (v. 8). When Elijah showed up, everything changed. No one could be neutral as to the presence of Elijah. He was either a troublemaker or a problem solver, depending on which side you were on.

When Elijah showed up, the false prophets and idolaters knew a confrontation was coming. I imagine the sound of his voice, rumbling across the mountains like the sound of thunder. His impact was always substantial. He could stop the rain and call down fire. No one could be passive about Elijah.

Where are the godly young people that make the world take notice today?

When Elijah prayed for the rain to stop, it was a physical reminder that the nation was going through a spiritual drought and needed to return to God. Rain is a symbol of God’s blessings in revival. He prayed, and the skies withheld showers of blessings for three years.

Where are those revival-raining people of today? As God is banned from schools and mainstream television gets tackier and tackier, where are those who can stand against public opinion and speak for God? Is it you?

Elijah didn’t hesitate to call people to make up their minds about God. He knew a decision had to be made and the time was now. The same is true today. These days demand a faith that cannot be compartmentalized. You can’t just be a Christian with your church friends. You have to be godly on the basketball court—yes, even in the locker room. Your friends need to see you coming and know which side you’re on.

God is on the lookout for young men and women wholly surrendered to Him. The answer is either yes or no; there is no in-between (see 1 Kings 18:21). Jesus said, “You are either for Me or against Me.”

In the midterm elections of 2010, the Tea Party got a great deal of attention. Whether you agree with them or not, they got attention because they had made up their minds about Washington politics: “Enough is enough. We want our country back!”

More recently, do you remember hearing about a man named Joseph Kony? Entire Twitter and Facebook feeds were filled with videos and posts about that man. Even if you didn’t watch the video, you couldn’t help but hear the name. An effort started by three people led to a viral campaign of awareness.

The gospel was the original viral message, and it's been trending for centuries, but the world is still fighting that message. God is looking for those who will stand up to a carnal, casual attitude toward the things of God and say, "Enough is enough!" It starts with just one person with the courage to make up his mind. That one person can see to it that the gospel goes viral.

Today on Mount Carmel there's a statue of Elijah with sword in hand. Even the statue seems to shout, "Elijah is here!" As you stand on that mountain, you can see the Valley of Armageddon below. One day in that valley the King of kings will show up to confront all His enemies, and on that day all will know: "Jesus is here!"

Elijah is found on the pages of the New Testament more than any other Old Testament prophet, appearing more than twenty-five times. He represented the prophets on the Mount of Transfiguration. John the Baptist reminded people of Elijah. And when Jesus asked, "Who do men say that I am?" some answered that He might be Elijah. He is an example of a man of prayer in the book of James. Elijah is known, not for any books he wrote, but for the deeds he did. He was a man of action and a man of prayer. To be effective in your work for God, you have to be a person of prayer.

So what can you do to turn the tide? You can make up your mind to be a godly young person, no matter the odds. Vance Havner said, "Elijah was no superman; but he could pray. He prayed down fire and water."<sup>1</sup> We need both today. We need the fire of the Spirit and the showers of revival. God is looking for someone who will say, "Here am I, send me." "For the eyes of Yahweh, roam throughout the earth to show Himself strong for those whose hearts are completely His" (2 Chron. 16:9). Does God have your heart?

We need an Elijah because the godless are ruling our society, and most don't seem to care. Have you noticed? The faith that once cost people their lives doesn't even motivate us to be faithful to our local church. Where are the Elijahs of God?

We need a person of courage to stand and call us to wake up (see Rom. 13:11–12; 1 Cor. 15:34; Eph. 5:11–14). It doesn't have to be a parent. It doesn't have to be a pastor. It can be you. Right now. Right where you are.

Why do we need to wake up? Most of what I see and hear encourages me to have a sense of entitlement, not sacrifice. To think about myself, not

others. Where is the one who “calls on Your name, striving to take hold of You. For You have hidden Your face from us and made us melt because of our iniquity” (Isa. 64:7)?

We’ve listened to celebrities, and they’ve failed us. We’ve listened to experts in the media, but they seem to know less than we do. We’ve listened to those who give us sugar-coated pop psychology, yet it doesn’t work. What we have in this media age is a pooling of ignorance. What we need is a leader who will stand up and call us to desperate prayer.

Elijah was a man’s man. He didn’t blend in with the Christianity-lite crowd. The one constant I hear from those who want to make a difference is: “Tell it straight. Don’t lighten up. Call us to commitment. We don’t need you to soft sell what God demands of us.”

So I won’t.

Many students your age are more committed to their video games, clothes, and iPods than they are to Christ. They would never think of turning down tickets to hear their favorite group in concert or an invitation to a shopping spree, but they’ll whine and complain about going to church on Sunday morning. I don’t care how old you are; you have to take responsibility and live in accountability.

Let me ask you a brutally honest question: Which is more important to you—texting, shopping, and gaming, or spending time in God’s Word? If you spent as much time on your extracurricular activities as you do on your walk with God, how good would you be at them? If you spent as much time on your walk with God as you do on your hobbies, what kind of person would you be?

How will we know if God has given us an Elijah? He will demand that we make up our minds. “If Yahweh is God, follow Him. But if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). D. L. Moody heard someone say that God was waiting to show the world what He could do through one wholly surrendered man, and Moody responded, “By the grace of God, I’ll be that man.”

Who could be that person today? It could be someone in your family. It could be that guy in English class. It could be you. Whoever it is, we need you now. God is walking the aisles today, stopping at every row to see if there is someone whose heart is set on Him.



God sent Elijah on the scene to judge and confront. J. Sidlow Baxter noted, “When wickedness develops into extraordinary proportions, God meets it with extraordinary measures.” Elijah was God’s man to take the initiative away from the godless king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah showed up and threw down the gauntlet. He boldly declared, “It’s not going to rain until I’m ready for it to rain.” Imagine being a weatherman in Israel during those days. Every day the forecast was the same: hot with a zero percent chance of rain. At least they knew how to dress!

Three years later the land was living in famine. Even in the face of death, starvation, and dehydration, the people continued to give their allegiance to false gods. You would think that today with so many hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tornados, and volcanic eruptions, someone would ask, “Do you think God is trying to tell us something?”

Make no mistake, everyone knew who Elijah was. Like Martin Luther, he was willing to nail his convictions to the door. Like Paul, he was willing to stand toe-to-toe before political leaders and demand they change their ways. Alexander Whyte said Elijah was a man who was always passionate about something. What are you passionate about?

His life was characterized by a burning desire to see the people return to the one true God. He was indignant at the compromise that surrounded him. The man with fire in his bones would call down fire because the honor of God was at stake. Elijah never faced a situation when he did not believe that God had an answer. Not only is he a model for a true prophet, but he is also a model for prevailing prayer.

Before the showdown on the mountain, there was a season of praying. As you read through the story of Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal, you realize that in prayer Elijah understood this was not about his being right but about the Lord God of Israel being exalted. He had a backbone, but he got it from bended knees.

The story is told of a man who stood at the grave of John Wesley, whose preaching shook England and led to a national revival, and said, “Do it again, Lord, do it again.” I’ve stood in an old Quaker cemetery outside Greensboro, North Carolina, by the tombstone of my hero Vance Havner, a twentieth-century revivalist and prophet, and asked God to use me as an instrument of revival.

C. H. Spurgeon wrote, “If you are sure it is a right thing for which you are asking, plead now, plead at noon, plead at night, plead on. With cries and tears spread out your case. Order your arguments. Back up your pleas with reasons.”<sup>2</sup>

Once you’ve prayed and have a word from God, stand on it. Walk onto the battlefield wearing your spiritual armor. Stand firm on the fact that God has heard your prayers and honors His promises. March into battle, no longer content to sit on the sidelines and give yourself, your school, your friends, your nation, to the devil by default.

I hear folks say, “I almost said something.” Well, why didn’t you?! Say something! Be bold! The early church didn’t move the world by staying in their holy huddle, by sticking with their Christian friends. They prayed and then went forth to share the message of the cross. Even when they were persecuted, they just prayed for more boldness.

“Behold, Elijah is here.” His presence changed the conversation and demanded a decision. I find it funny (and sad) when I walk into a situation and people change their conversations because the “preacher” is here. I don’t want the conversation to change because I’m the preacher. I want it to change because they recognize me as a man of God. Let me ask you, does the conversation ever change when you walk into the room? Are there jokes they will not tell and things they will not say in your presence?

Elijah showed up and said, “Tell the king and that woman, I’m here. Tell the false prophets, I’m here. Tell your so-called gods, I’m here” (see 1 Kings 18:17–19). No one gets away with rebellion against God. Name one nation or empire that maintained its domination after giving themselves to violence, godless idolatry, sensuality, and immorality. Whether it is the Philistines, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Huns, Nazis, Communists, or the terrorists, all have or will pass off the scene. If America doesn’t have a Mount Carmel moment, we too will fall.

Our nation is clearly worshipping false gods at false altars. We bow before everything from an all-you-can-eat buffet (in a world of poverty and starvation) to the gods of fame and fortune. We treat celebrities like gods. We bow down to politicians who appear to hold the power of life and death in their hands. We sell our souls for entertainment, technology, and science.

We have everything—except God. Before my generation points fingers at your generation, remind us: it happened on my generation's watch.

We worship at the altar of political correctness and nonoffensive preaching. We have little appetite for the meat of the Word and a call to the cross.

I'm sure someone tried to tell Elijah to be more positive. The problem is that you can't be positive about something that is negative. You can't call disaster a success. You can't applaud compromise as commitment. We must have the courage to "come apart" and "be holy." Christianity is not a cafeteria line where we pick and choose what we want. "If the Lord is God, follow Him."

Elijah was not the troubler of Israel as Ahab deemed. He was the only one standing between Israel and certain, lasting judgment. The courageous will disturb the peace of status quo. He will call his friends to stand up. She is resolute and not ashamed to say it. Ahab was the troublemaker; Elijah was the troubleshooter.

We live in an age when godlessness abounds at every hand. If America is going to avoid being a twenty-first-century version of the book of Judges, we're going to have to find those who will stand up without hesitation or reservation for things eternal.

We need one to show up who will speak for God. Luther showed up and confronted the corruption of the established church. When politics and morals were at low ebb in Great Britain, God raised up Tyndale, Whitfield, and Wesley to turn the tide and initiate a great revival. When America needed a man to stand up, Jonathan Edwards answered the call. Billy Sunday stood up in the days when alcohol was destroying the land. When is someone going to stand up in the twenty-first century and say, "That's enough"?

What is stopping us from having a move of God today? If we make up our minds to follow Christ fully and to bend the knee to no one but our Lord, we can see the tide turn. But it won't happen on our current course.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah threw down the gauntlet. The game was on. It was time for a spiritual smack-down. Three groups gathered that day: the devoted servant of God, Elijah; the dedicated followers of Baal; and the undecided masses. James said an indecisive man is unstable in all his ways (1:8). It may have looked like Elijah was alone, but the man of God is never

alone. One plus God equals a majority. “The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Elijah demanded a choice be made. He determined three and a half years were enough time to reach a decision. The false gods had not come through, and they weren’t going to. Why the delay? How long will you hesitate (see 1 Kings 18:21)? The word *hesitate* means “to halt or limp along.” How much time do you need? How many sermons do you have to hear? The time is now to make up your mind. Have the courage to pick a side.

Remember the plague of frogs in Egypt? The frogs took over, and finally Pharaoh called Moses in and said, “Get rid of the frogs.” Moses told him he would, but he tossed the ball back in Pharaoh’s court as to the timing. Pharaoh said, “Tomorrow.” One more night with the frogs. I’m miserable, but before I get rid of my misery, can I sleep with it one more time (see Exod. 8:8ff)? Why would we delay getting rid of the figurative plagues in our lives?

Elijah demanded a commitment. He gave the prophets of Baal the chance to go first. If they were smart and had paid attention during those three years of drought, they would have repented. But they didn’t. They cried out all day long. They cut themselves, chanted, and shouted, and nothing happened. False gods are like that; they never come through when you need them.

Elijah let them go on and even mocked them. Finally he declared enough was enough. He started rebuilding the altar and called on God to answer (1 Kings 18:30–39). Elijah prayed. All the high points of his life came as the result of the effectual prayer of a righteous man. He prayed it wouldn’t rain, and it didn’t. He prayed for fire to fall, and it did. He prayed it would rain again, and it poured. You can’t impact your generation if you aren’t willing to have a showdown and live with the consequences.

Elijah called on God to answer by fire. When the fire fell, the people got it. It reminded them of their history with Jehovah: the burning bush, Mount Sinai, the pillar of fire. Fire was a symbol of the presence and power of God. The fire fell and consumed everything. When God’s fire falls in revival, it will burn away the dross and junk that has hindered us. Then Elijah prayed for rain, and the rain came and revived the land.

That's my call in this chapter. It is my prayer that God would use the example of Elijah to inspire us to make up our mind. It is my hope that we will resolve to tell the truth and confront the culture. And it is my dream to see those efforts stir up a great revival in this land.

## — Think Courageously —

1. Can you think of a modern-day Elijah? Can you think of someone who has made a public, uncompromising stand for Christ?
2. Do your friends and family know what you stand for? How do they know?
3. How much time do you spend seeking God each day? Each week?
4. What other commitments interfere with your commitment to Christ?
5. Think of one thing that you could spend less time doing. Commit to replacing thirty minutes of that time with time seeking God.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Courage to Choose and Refuse

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter and chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the short-lived pleasure of sin. For he considered the reproach because of the Messiah to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since his attention was on the reward.”

HEBREWS 11:24–26

*“Whatever patterns we set for [our kids] will likely be used for their kids, and the generation after that.”*

—ADAM MITCHELL, *COURAGEOUS*

I love biographies. They give me insight into what made that person tick. They allow us to see the cause and effect of life’s choices. They also allow us to learn life’s lessons vicariously—seeing the outcome of the choice without personally experiencing the consequences.

Can you imagine how much better life would be if we applied all the life lessons of those before us to our own lives? But so many times we get bogged down by I-can-do-it-myself-itis or I-don’t-need-your-help-osis or I Know What’s Best for My Life! Syndrome.

John Mason writes, “The world makes room for a person of purpose. Their words and actions demonstrate that they know where they are going. . . In your heart there is a sleeping lion called purpose. Be on a mission. Have a definite sense of direction and purpose for your life. . . . Strong convictions precede great actions.”<sup>1</sup>

So how do we balance that? How do we have an attitude of learning while having a “definite sense of direction”? There’s no doubt that it’s a

delicate balance, but it is possible. It requires the humility to accept advice, the wisdom to make a decision, and the courage to stand by it. Still, it's an invaluable life skill. And if you can figure it out now, you'll be way ahead of a lot of adults.

God's Word is full of great biographies—and a lot of life lessons. These were not all perfect people but people who impacted their world. They made the tough calls. You can spend your life on the wide road or the straight and narrow. There are consequences either way. One couple chose the narrow path, which ultimately led to the salvation of the Israelites.

You can't talk about Moses without talking about his parents. At a time when being a Hebrew was dangerous—and to be a Hebrew male baby was the death sentence—they rose above pressure and politics. They refused to cave in. Moses' parents knew God and believed Him for a greater purpose for their son.

Moses' parents were from the tribe of Levi, an insignificant tribe at the time. They aren't even named at the beginning of the story, but their legacy lives to this day. Why? Because they had the courage to choose and refuse.

The birth of Moses was a nation-changing, culture-changing birth. Moses' father's name, Amram, means “an exalted people.” His mother's name, Jochebed, means “God is honored.” God's name was honored, and a nation of slaves was exalted over the mighty nation of Egypt because one couple refused to cave in to the pressures surrounding them. The birth of Moses signaled the end of four hundred years of bondage. God heard and answered. Out of slavery came a great leader. Out of obscurity came a great man.

Moses' parents lived by faith even in a difficult, if not unbearable, situation. Yet the Bible clearly reminds us that favorable conditions do not add to faith. Murdering babies was the order of the day in Egypt because population growth was a threat to Pharaoh. Years later, King Herod would issue a similar order so that he might rid the country of the supposed Messiah. Dictators often seek to eliminate the innocent.

We still haven't learned our lesson. Today women are being talked into getting rid of their babies because conditions are not “favorable.” Have we lost the next great leader of this generation because we listened to and followed ungodly advice? Has fear cost us more than we can measure? We will never know.

But Amram and Jochebed sensed that their son was someone special and unique. Instead of following Pharaoh's orders, Moses' mother prepared a basket for her son and placed Moses in the river, believing God would protect him. The future deliverer of Israel was found by Pharaoh's daughter. Jochebed then placed Moses' sister Miriam on the bank to watch. Certainly a mother wouldn't have placed her child in a position to watch her younger brother be murdered. No, she believed God would provide for her baby. Miriam was in a position to watch the Lord show up.

Moses' parents made a choice. They refused to follow the societal norm, and as a result God put a deliverer in the land. They feared God more than Pharaoh, and "they didn't fear the king's edict" (Heb. 11:23). Because his parents didn't fear the king, Moses would one day stand before the king's successor without fear. Because of her parents' example, Miriam learned at an early age that God is sovereign over all.

When you have the courage to choose and refuse, you affect everyone around you. Courage is contagious. It is important that parents give you courage and a sense of blessing. But if they don't, ask for it! I know it can be hard or even seem unnatural when you're trying to be independent, but ask for their advice before making a decision. Ask for their approval before taking action on your decision. Not only will their experience guide you in the right direction, but you will also help your parents to feel important and needed by their baby who became a young adult overnight. (Trust me. I know.)

Whether you admit it or not, what your parents encourage and support is important. I know you've heard Exodus 20:12, "Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land." (It's no coincidence that Moses himself was the messenger here.) God wasn't just picking on you; He's giving you sound advice for life. Second Thessalonians 2:15 tells us to "stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught." You weren't intended to do this on your own.

I understand, too, that not everyone reading this book comes from a perfect family—in fact, I know that none of you do. There is no such thing. However, those of you who have two supportive, godly parents in the home—please—consider yourself blessed. And for those of you who do not, well, you can consider yourself blessed too. Regardless of your home situation, you are under the protective, powerful, prosperous hand of God.



Moses had two loving parents, but still found himself floating in a river all alone.

I'm not going to tell you that it's a wonderful, happy world out there. The devil is "prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), and you'd better believe that he wants to devour and destroy your generation. Be thankful if you have parents who instill tenacity, offer tough love, and stick to boundaries. They're strengthening your ability to battle the evil that awaits in this world. Moses' parents did the same; they modeled a fear of God over the fear of man.

Don't be afraid to take a stand against the popular. You are accountable for your life and the lives you touch. Live biblically. Are you looking to Scripture for guidance? Don't let culture suck you down the sewer.

Consider the analogy of the eagle, the chicken, and the ostrich. Eagles teach their eaglets to fly. They disturb them and push them out of the nest. Eagles expect their offspring to soar. Chickens, on the other hand, teach their chicks to eat almost anything. They teach them to scratch, sit, and cackle. They have no skills to defend the henhouse against predators. The ostrich hides his head in the sand and sticks his tail up in the air. Ostrich parents assume nothing and are surprised when something happens. They often let their kids date too early, dress immodestly, hang out with the wrong crowd, or go places unsupervised; and they ultimately refuse to set parameters altogether.

Which type of parent would you want? Which type of bird would you rather be?

I love the storyline in the movie *Courageous* that follows one of the fathers, Nathan, and his teenage daughter, Jade. Nathan makes clear to her and to a young man who is interested in her that there are rules in his family for dating his daughter. He is a proactive dad. Of course, he embarrasses his daughter in the process, but it's a small price to pay for her safety. Then when the young man ends up in jail, Nathan takes him under his wing as well. Nathan is an eagle of a father.

A parent once came into our youth minister's office, concerned his son was watching porn on the Internet. Our youth minister asked the father where the computer was located, and he replied, "In his room." The youth minister suggested he move the computer out of his son's room and put it in a room where it was visible, like the living room. The parent responded,

“That would be an invasion of his privacy.” He was so concerned with protecting his son’s rights that he was neglecting to protect his son.

Fortunately, we’re all humans; we’re not born with the instincts of an eagle, nor are we stuck with the head-burying techniques of the ostrich. Regardless of our parents or our social status, God has blessed us with the ability to choose who we turn out to be.

Failure to be courageous in our decision-making will result in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. You have to think for yourselves. Don’t hide behind text messages, e-mail, Twitter, or Facebook. Face the confrontation. Refuse the pressure of the world.

If you want to be a Moses, you can’t be acting like a chicken or an ostrich. The eagle knows the way and shows the way. He doesn’t lie around, eating and getting lazy. He pushes beyond the comfort zone. Moses was courageous eagle. I know he ran in fear and ended up in the desert for forty years herding sheep. But in the end Moses was God’s man for the hour (Heb. 11:24–27).

With parents who invested in him and a God who directed him, Moses overcame four issues that paralyze most people: Who am I (Heb. 11:24)? What choices should I make (v. 25)? What really matters (v. 26)? What is my purpose (v. 27)? Following his parents’ example, Moses was willing to make the tough choices. The cynics of the day would have said, “What a waste. He threw away all that education, power, and influence to live in the wilderness.” But God had a higher purpose for his life than being a prince in Egypt.

When I read of the choices Moses made and consider the options he had, I think of the person described in Psalm 1:1–3:

How happy is the man  
who does not follow the advice of the wicked  
or take the path of sinners  
or join a group of mockers!  
Instead, his delight is in the LORD’s instruction,  
and he meditates on it day and night.  
He is like a tree planted beside streams of water  
that bears its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither.

Whatever he does prospers.

As a young man raised in a wealthy family, William Borden made significant choices that cause us to remember him to this day. Every young person at some point has to decide, will I live for myself or for God? There's only one right answer to that question.

William Borden was faced with a difficult decision after graduating from high school in Chicago in 1904. As heir to the Borden family fortune, he received a trip around the world as a graduation present. During his travels his heart was burdened for the people hurting throughout the world, and he decided to become a missionary. As friends scoffed at this idea, Borden wrote in his Bible: "No reserves."

Borden headed to Yale University and quickly stood out from the crowd, though not due to his massive wealth. A fellow student noted, "He came to college far ahead, spiritually, of any of us. He had already given his heart in full surrender to Christ and had really done it. We who were his classmates learned to lean on him and find in him a strength that was solid as a rock, just because of this settled purpose and consecration."<sup>2</sup>

As a college student Borden started a morning prayer group. He went after the toughest students to win to Christ, ministered to the underprivileged, got involved in social issues, and founded the Yale Hope Mission to rescue drunks off the streets. He eventually ministered to the Muslim Kansu people in China. Borden never hesitated in that calling. Though he was a millionaire, Borden kept his eyes fixed on Christ. His focus freed him to turn down many lucrative job offers after graduation. At this time he wrote two more words in his Bible: "No retreats."

Next Borden went on to Princeton Seminary and then set sail for China following the completion of his studies. He stopped in Egypt to study Arabic where he contracted spinal meningitis and died within a month at twenty-five years of age. News of Borden's untimely death quickly spread through the American media. The widow of Hudson Taylor wrote, "Borden not only gave his wealth, but himself, in a way so joyous and natural that it seemed a privilege rather than a sacrifice."<sup>3</sup> Prior to his death, Borden wrote two more words in his Bible: "No regrets."

No reserves. No retreats. No regrets.

Borden's story is similar to that of another young man, Moses. Moses walked away from fame, fortune, power, and the pleasures of Egypt (Acts 7:22). A pagan world can never comprehend the person of conviction. It's beyond their ability to grasp, yet they are the ones wasting their lives on things not eternal.

God has a different definition of success. Moses left the palace and never looked back. He "refused" (Heb. 11:24). To *refuse* is to reject, deny, or totally disown. Dying to self is the most liberating decision of life. It is the defining moment that defines all other moments.

Some might say, "But Moses never saw the Promised Land. He did all that and didn't make it." They would be right . . . and wrong. If Moses had not taken the stand he did, he also would have never been a witness to the power and miraculous intervention of God in his generation.

Negatively, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He rejected the sure deal. Positively, he chose to suffer affliction with the people of God and embraced the riches of a child of the King of kings. He looked at what Egypt had to offer and what God was calling him to, and he chose God. You could say he rejected the crown to take up his cross and follow daily.

We see this attitude exhibited in the believers in Thessalonica as we read how they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). They forsook idols and false gods for the one true God. These new believers were barely fifty miles from Mount Olympus, where it was said the Greek gods resided. Living in the shadow of all the false gods, they saw the one true God. It's not that their false gods weren't appealing. But in the one true God, they found the false gods to be empty, meaningless, and lacking power to change their lives.

Think about the significance of Moses' choosing and refusing. Josephus tells us Moses was in line for the throne of Egypt, but he chose to identify himself with a nation of slaves. Which do you think was the easier road? When we choose the road of least resistance, when we choose to go along with the crowd, we place ourselves on the path of compromise and carnality. We will remain ineffective in addressing and confronting the problems of this world if we continue on the path of compromise. For a Christian with courage, compromise is not an option, no matter what others say.

Not long ago I was in a discussion with a group of Christian leaders about tipping points. There are tipping points in churches, homes, morals, and ethics that act as a point of no return. Once you reach that point, it's hard to get back to what used to be. Some believe America is on the verge of a tipping point. Some feel the tipping point for our country will come by the year 2020. At that point the decay of morals, values, and the Judeo-Christian ethic, along with the rise of Islam in America, will take us to a point of no turning back.

It has been said that the only reason we are not already at that tipping point is because of the influx of Hispanics into America who are predominantly Catholic. In other words, we are approaching the cliff on the eve of destruction, and no one is applying the brakes and considering the carnage that will come.

Where are the young men and women of courage in our country? When God's people are silent, there is no one to confront the growing influence of false spirituality. As Adam says in the final Resolution scene in *Courageous*, "Where are you, men of courage?" If we ever needed the courageous to stand up, it's now.

We must ask God to empower a generation willing to risk everything for the gospel. In 1546 Anne Askew was imprisoned and tortured in England because of her faith. She was stretched out on a rack, and her joints and bones were pulled out of socket. When she regained consciousness, she shared the love of Christ for two hours to those who were tormenting and torturing her.

The day she was led to her execution, they had to carry her to the stake in a chair because her bones were dislocated and she was unable to walk. At the last minute she was offered a pardon if she would recant. She replied, "I did not come here to deny my Lord and Master."

As young people, this is no time to hesitate or be timid. We can no longer play it safe and hope that life will always be safe or easy. Hard times may be ahead for us as God's people and as a nation. We need young men and women who will have the tenacity to stand.

I'm encouraged by the movement I see among young adults. They are giving themselves to Christian works and missions and taking the road less traveled. As the twentieth-century martyr Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."

My challenge to your generation is simple: don't buy the lie of the prosperity gospel and Christianity lite. Give yourself to the gospel of Christ who came to seek and save the lost. Find the abundant life in the Lord, not in things. Invest in what matters for eternity.

Be like Moses.

See beyond the moment and make the choices that will impact a generation for Christ. Moses saw things differently. Vance Havner said, "Moses chose the imperishable, saw the invisible, and did the impossible."<sup>4</sup> The result was that God found a man He could trust to stand up to the most powerful dictator of the day and lead His people out of bondage.

Moses learned from his parents, and he learned in the wilderness. It was there that he was learning to lead. Sheep are dumb animals, and Moses was about to be the shepherd of Israel. He needed to learn how to lead those who desperately need a leader. He received tutelage from his father-in-law and learned about the ways of God at the burning bush. God taught him things in the desert he would have never learned in Egypt. God taught Moses the principles of life and leadership in the wilderness of obscurity, lessons he would have never learned in the lap of luxury.

Sometimes God has to slow us down to get our attention. Jim Elliot said, "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence."<sup>5</sup> When Moses left the wilderness, he was a man on a mission.

Where did the courage come from? He knew it wasn't him versus Pharaoh; it was the one true God versus all the false gods of Egypt (Num. 33:2–4). Behind Egyptian polytheism stood the forces of Satan himself. There were spiritual principalities and powers behind the earthly powers. God sent Moses to execute judgment against all the false gods of Egypt. The plagues were really confrontations against the ten gods that each plague represented. Those whom God calls will be "more than victorious" (Rom. 8:37).

Moses' parents had the courage to choose and refuse. They considered the orders of Pharaoh and refused to follow them. They chose, instead, to risk their lives and obey God, refusing to do what every other family was doing. Their decision was a defining moment. As a result of their obedience, Moses himself had the courage to choose and refuse.

How will you be remembered?

Here's how Moses was remembered. "Moses was 120 years old when he died; his eyes were not weak, and his vitality had not left him. . . . No prophet has arisen again in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unparalleled for all the signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do against the land of Egypt—to Pharaoh, to all his officials, and to all his land, and for all the mighty acts of power and terrifying deeds that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel" (Deut. 34:7, 10–12).

When you look at his life on the whole, you see a man who sized up the situation and circumstances of his day and said, "I'm going with God." Moses didn't give himself to a cause or to a movement; he gave himself to Jehovah. Martin Luther said there are only two days that matter: this day and that day. If you aren't living *this* day for Christ, you won't be ready to face Him on *that* day. What you do with God today will determine whether your life's work is wood, hay, and stubble or gold, silver, and precious stones.

What is God's will for your life? God has a plan and purpose for you. You are not here by accident (see Ps. 139; Jer. 1:5). If we learn to number our days, we will redeem the time God has given us. It's never too late to become what God made you to be. The higher you climb, the fewer choices you have. The road narrows the closer you get to the top. Decisions have to be made. As believers, the choices are between good, better, and best.

Phillips Brooks said, "A man who lives right and is right has more power in his silence than another has by his words."

I challenge you to have the courage to choose and refuse, to live godly lives, be godly examples, and ultimately to turn this nation back to God. I challenge you to be young men and women with whom God can entrust a great opportunity. To do that we must choose and refuse. We must choose the best and reject anything less.

## — Think Courageously —

1. Think of a time when you saw one of your parents take a stand.  
What happened?

2. Think of a time when you took a stand for someone. What did you do?
3. What is one dilemma that you are currently facing?
4. Name some ways that you can gather advice or information about that dilemma.
5. Do three of those things before you make your decision. Choose the best path, and refuse to stray from it.



## CHAPTER 7

# The Courage to Face Persecution

“They were stoning Stephen as he called out: ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin!’ And saying this, he fell asleep.”

ACTS 7:59–60

*“I’m accepting the fact that I need to learn to do the hard things.”*

—ADAM MITCHELL, *COURAGEOUS*

**P**ersecution. I’m guessing it’s not a subject that you and your friends discuss frequently over the lunch table—or even in youth group. It’s just not an issue that many teenagers, or many Americans for that matter, seem to face.

But I have to wonder: is that because we’re not bold enough to be persecuted?

In a land where P.C. is king (or *queen*, to be politically correct), we’ve been worn down to tolerate just about anything. We’ve been scared into silence, lest we be ostracized by our peers. But is that the mark of true Christianity? The Bible warns of persecution. Jesus Himself was the very epitome of persecution. So, if we are to speak boldly for Christ, if we are to refuse the ideals of this world, it stands to reason that we just may face a little persecution along the way.

Have you ever heard the name Richard Wurmbrand (1909–2001)? He was a Jew who converted to Christianity in 1938 after studying Marxism in Moscow. In 1944, when the Communists began to establish themselves in Romania, Wurmbrand began a ministry that eventually went underground. He was arrested on February 29, 1948, while on his way to church. Over the

next two decades he would be placed in numerous penal facilities where he was tortured, spent three years in solitary confinement, and was put to hard labor. After eight and a half years in prison, Wurmbrand was released in 1956 and immediately went right back to his work in the underground church. Not long after, he was arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years, and he was again beaten and tortured severely.

Finally a release was negotiated, and Wurmbrand left the country. In 1966 he appeared before a Senate committee and took off his shirt in front of television cameras to reveal the scars of his torture. The following year he formed what would become The Voice of the Martyrs, an “inter-denominational Christian organization dedicated to assisting the persecuted church worldwide.”

Some have said the persecuted church is the growing church. It seems to be true. While the church is exploding in Third World countries, the church is declining in America and Europe. Benjamin E. Fernando said, “Crushing the church is like smashing the atom: divine energy of high quality is released in enormous quantity with miraculous effects.”

Billy Graham said, “It is unnatural for Christianity to be popular.”<sup>[1](#)</sup> Maybe that’s why the American church has become so insipid and apathetic. We cannot and should not expect better treatment than our Lord (see Matt. 10:17–20; John 15:18–19).

You can’t read the book of Acts without coming face-to-face with the reality of persecution. Rather than causing the early church to crumble, it was the spark that ignited it. You would think it would be just the opposite. You would think the church would grow in times when it has materially prospered, but such is not the case. Persecution separates the wheat from the tares, the converted from the pretenders.

My friends Peter and Jetta Vidu serve the Second Baptist Church of Oradea in Romania. I first met Peter a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he and his wife are two of the most godly, humble people I have ever met. They have been used mightily by God to build a phenomenal church in Oradea, complete with a school, a seminary, and a vibrant witness to the nation.

Under Communism, they lived with persecution and threats. Since the fall of Communism, there is a new persecution, which includes the

Orthodox Church. In an interview in 1993, Peter said, “Always there has been persecution for the real Christians. And there are only two kinds of persecution: pagan persecution and religious persecution. We have had a pagan persecution under the Communists, and now we are threatened with a religious persecution.”

Persecution is a reality for believers around the world. Christians are becoming the targets of governments and other religions. The Voice of the Martyrs blog notes:

The persecution facing Christians is the largest “human rights” violation issue in today’s world. However, it is impossible to know with absolute certainty the exact number of Christians who are killed each year for their faith.

According to the World Evangelical Alliance, over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are denied fundamental human rights solely because of their faith. David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing in their 2009 report in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research (Vol. 33, No. 1: 32) estimate that approximately 176,000 Christians will have been martyred from mid-2008 to mid-2009. This, according to the authors, compares to 160,000 martyrs in mid-2000 and 34,400 at the beginning of the 20th century. If current trends continue, Barrett, Johnson and Crossing estimate that by 2025, an average of 210,000 Christians will be martyred annually (<http://persecutedchurch.blogspot.com>).

Although it is hard for us to imagine this, it seems the pattern is following similar lines as those used by the Germans against the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a strategy of slowly isolating and discriminating. You don’t have to look far to realize there are those in our land who are seeking to marginalize the church and believers. Once you instill racism or prejudice against a people—whether on the basis of race, creed, or religion—you can begin to ramp up the establishment of laws hindering those groups and ultimately justify persecuting them.

It was simple at first—just take prayer, the Bible, and the Ten Commandments out of our public institutions. Make it difficult for cities and communities to display anything religious on public property. Once you’ve established a pattern, the generations that follow eventually know nothing of our nation’s religious heritage.

A few years ago a woman in Houston, Texas, was told she could not hand out gospel tracts to kids knocking on her door during Halloween. In another state an organization hands out material to schoolchildren entitled, “We Can Be Good without God.” All of this was reinforced to me when I recently read S. E. Cupp’s book, *Losing Our Religion*. Though an atheist, Cupp recognizes the liberal media’s attacks on Christianity and writes of their long-term effects on our land.

Unless the pattern reverses, your generation is even more likely to face persecution. We may not ever face severe persecution, but on whatever level opposition comes, we are called to be faithful and courageous. If our passion is to please God and to give Him glory, we will face growing persecution.

In light of that, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your passion to advance the glory of God? Are you in any way ashamed of identifying yourself as a believer in Christ? And are you ready to face the increased persecution that comes with increased passion for Christ?

As you read Acts, you are introduced to Stephen. He was one of the first deacons and was the first martyr of the church in Jerusalem. He was a man who knew how to live and was prepared to die (see Acts 6:5, 8; 7:55).

When the persecution of the church was in its earliest stages, Stephen, along with the disciples, was a key spokesperson. He has to be counted among one of the great men of the Bible as he helped set the tone for the early church. It is no exaggeration to say that his martyrdom was a “pivotal and epoch-making moment in the ongoing purpose of God. . . . Everything in the first half of the book of Acts leads up to it and stems from it.”<sup>2</sup>

Vance Havner said, “There are not two gospels, one for missionaries and martyrs, the other for those who name the name of Christ but let Him bear the Cross alone while they themselves go free.” On the heels of the outpouring of the Spirit, there was growing resentment and persecution of the church by the religious leaders. They saw Christ as a threat to their way of life. In the face of growing opposition, Stephen stood up to defend the faith.

Stephen’s defense of the faith brought about such anger and opposition that the religious leaders were enraged by him. Stephen was persecuted and eventually stoned to death as the first martyr. The word *martyr* means

witness, one who gives testimony. With the death of Stephen, the term took on new meaning as one who would die for the faith.

Stephen was not a seminary graduate. He wasn't even a mature believer and had probably been saved less than five years. Yet he gave himself totally to Christ and displayed a maturity and boldness rarely seen in the local church today. Stephen was full of God. The Holy Spirit empowered him to live an extraordinary life even in the face of derision and death. Stephen loved God, and God delighted in putting him in a position where He could shine.

It would be hard to examine the short life of Stephen and not come to the conclusion, "This is a courageous man!" When brought before the religious leaders, Stephen did not tremble in fear. Although they saw Stephen as a problem, he saw them as an opportunity to preach Christ. It drove them crazy (see Acts 6:9–14).

What made Stephen courageous? He was full of the Spirit. "Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). If we are going to be courageous, we can't underestimate the importance of those three characteristics. God's design is for us to walk in the fullness of the Spirit. It is a command for us to be "filled by the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). It is impossible to be courageous in the faith without the filling of the Spirit. Stephen lived in the overflow of the Spirit. The difference between the first-century church and the twenty-first-century church is that they were power-conscious and we are problem-conscious. They weren't perfect, but they had a standard that we too often compromise out of fear.

Stephen was also full of wisdom, faith, and power, able to make decisions and choices controlled by the Spirit. He was wise enough to know he needed God's wisdom. He didn't run ahead of God or act on his own (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Stephen could cut to the chase and see the real issues behind the façades. In fact, Luke wrote, "they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he [Stephen] was speaking" (Acts 6:10).

Acts 7 is the record of his sermon and response to the religious leaders. It is the longest sermon in the book of Acts, but Stephen didn't waste time addressing the false charges. He was single-minded, focused on the story of God's plan of redemption. Why was this significant? Because it reveals a man whose mind was saturated with the Word of God. He knew his Bible.

He knew the people, the history, and the purpose of it all. The Holy Spirit took what he knew and empowered him to communicate it clearly, concisely, and without apology.

Today Americans are biblically illiterate. We know little of the precious promises and unchanging commands of the Word of God. A. W. Pink said, “No verse of Scripture yields its meaning to lazy people.”<sup>3</sup> You can’t defend what you don’t know. The great R. A. Torrey wrote, “Ninety-nine Christians in every hundred are merely playing at Bible study, and therefore ninety-nine Christians in every hundred are merely weaklings when they might be giants.”<sup>4</sup> If you just know a little here and there, you’ll come to the wrong conclusions.

Stephen was a man who knew the Scriptures. He didn’t just have them in his head; he hid them in his heart. He was a student of the stories of God’s faithfulness. Unfortunately some people know just enough to be dangerous. I would encourage you: be sure you are learning from the preaching of a man of God who accurately handles the Word of God.

We need believers who know what they believe and why they believe it. We need Christ followers who will not waver or follow strange doctrines. Don’t just believe it because your parents do. Dig into it. Study it. Talk to God about it. If you don’t know what you believe, you will never be able to figure out where you should stand. One thing you can know for certain is that the Holy Spirit will never lead you to do anything inconsistent with the life of Christ or the revealed Word of God.

Stephen was full of faith. His faith gave him courage to face opposition and believe God for the strength to stand against it. When you read Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter, you discover that people of faith always *did* something. Faith is active, not passive. Faith is confident that God will do what He says. Faith follows God implicitly.

Faith looks to God; it doesn’t trust in itself or in personal abilities or strength. Faith takes God at His Word and obeys without hesitation or reservation. Someone has said it well, “Faith has no back door.” Faith never panics. Rather, it leads us to claim a promise, take a stand, accept a difficult assignment, or surrender to go to a far-off land. Whereas Thomas was full of doubt, Stephen was full of faith.

Stephen was also full of grace, as his countenance revealed. “And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). The peace of God was present on his face even in the face of persecution. I’ve seen panic on the faces of believers at red lights, in sudden downpours, and amid the simplest setbacks. These seventy Jewish leaders were doing all they could to attack Stephen, but he seemed unaffected by it all. His countenance radiated with the grace of Jesus. Even in the face of his accusers, he was gracious in offering them an opportunity to come to Christ. One writer said, “It challenged his foes and charmed his friends.” His life overflowed with the grace of God.

Will we be as full of grace when we’re persecuted?

God’s grace makes us like Jesus. God’s grace gave Stephen what he needed to be a witness, whether to a widow or to someone who wanted to war with him. God’s grace through Stephen was amazing and abounding. And that same grace is sufficient anywhere we go, anytime we need it. As someone has said, “The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.”

Stephen was a man full of power, not according to the world’s ideals but to God’s. The thirst for power drives this world. But ultimately, all the powers of this world will come to an end. Stephen’s power did not come through a position or title; it came from the Holy Spirit. His was not the power of a magnetic personality. Rather, it was the personality of the person of the Holy Spirit that shone through all Stephen did and said. The Holy Spirit enabled him to “proclaim the gospel, defend the faith, and endure a martyr’s death.”<sup>5</sup>

While we live in a power-hungry, power-conscious world, we should learn the difference between temporary power and God’s abiding power. We serve the God with power to create, redeem, sustain, and overrule. We need power for living. Our lives should reveal the Spirit’s empowerment to live as Christ intends for us to live. Remember, the promise of the Spirit’s coming was accompanied by the promise of His power (see Acts 1:8). If you are going to be courageous, you need power.

And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. (Acts 4:33)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a powerful demonstration by the Spirit, so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power. (1 Cor. 2:4–5)

Stephen, full of the Spirit, had power to preach and power to face the persecution. He had power to stand and power to suffer. He was able to exalt Christ and endure for Christ. This resulted in his ability even to pray for his persecutors.

Where are the lives that exemplify courageous power today? Where are the young men and women who have a holy boldness? God gave Stephen power to proclaim the truth in the face of a hostile crowd.

You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; as your ancestors did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They even killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. (Acts 7:51–52)

A person full of power not only knows how to act, but he also knows how to react. Stephen's opponents, however, didn't react kindly.

When they heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God's glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together



rushed against him. They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They were stoning Stephen as he called out: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin!” And saying this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:54–60)

Have you ever stubbed your toe? Just the pain of it makes you mad, makes you want to punch the sofa for getting in your way, doesn’t it? Now imagine angry people, pelting you with stones, looking you in the eye, intended to kill you. Do you think it would anger you?

Yet even as he was being stoned, Stephen made the same two requests Jesus made at the cross: receive my spirit and forgive them. *Forgive them.* Do you remember who else made that cry as He was persecuted?

We know of at least two who heard Stephen’s cries that day—Saul, who would later give his life to follow Christ; and Jesus, who stood at the right hand of God. Think about it, the last person Stephen talked to on earth was Jesus, and the first person he saw in heaven was Jesus. Quite an exit, wouldn’t you say?

The American church is not ready for persecution. We aren’t the stuff of which martyrs are made. We are wimpy, self-serving, and self-centered, dining on baby food and watered-down Christianity. One of my favorite illustrations ever used by Ron Dunn was entitled “Braving the Rain.” He wrote the following article for his church newsletter at MacArthur Boulevard Baptist Church after reading another pastor’s article thanking his members for “braving the rain” to come to church.

I want to thank all of you who BRAVED THE RAIN last Sunday morning to attend church. Such sacrifice and suffering humbled me. I can imagine how it must be to awaken to the petrifying noise of rain. Dedication hangs in the balance. The silky voice of the Tempter whispers in your ear: “Don’t be foolish! Why risk your life?”

Suddenly, your shoulders snap to attention, the jaw sets in determination. “Get thee behind me, Satan!” you shout, “and hang the crease in my pants.” Then, counting not your life dear unto

yourself and side-stepping treacherous mud holes, you splash through the deluge to your waiting car.

Demonstrating raw courage, you navigate your four-wheeled ark over three blocks of slippery streets, while the rain slams against your windshield like silver bullets. Surely, this deserves a place among those other heroic exploits of the faithful: “they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tortured, THEY BRAVED THE RAIN.”

Reaching the church, you once again take your life into your hands and with nerves of steel, plunge from the drenched car and over sappy sidewalks to the dry haven of the classroom.

As I stand at my window watching this spectacle, my heart swells. I hear distant applause—strange applause—wings clapping?

I can hardly preach. I feel I must write a new edition of *Foxes Book of Christian Martyrs*. How the world must have gasped in unbelief and admiration as they saw you BRAVE THE RAIN.

The cross demands more of us! The twenty-first century finds us facing increased persecution in America. We can no longer expect (and maybe we don’t deserve) preferential treatment. In a generation absorbed with celebrities and façades, we need solid, stand-up Christians like Stephen.

Are you that person?

I’ve stood at the gate where Stephen was stoned to death two thousand years ago and wondered, where are the ones who will stand at the gates of our cities and call the people back to God? We need boldness in this land of the bland. We need passion in the midst of apathy. We need a Stephen, “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3).

Will you be the one to answer that call?

When all around you comes crashing down, can God trust you to stand?

## — Think Courageously —

1. What would you say is the closest you’ve ever come to persecution?

2. Do you shy away from discussing some subjects because you fear what others will say? What are they? What do you fear?
3. What does the Bible say about those subjects?
4. Imagine Stephen walking through the halls of your school. Who would he hang out with? What would he say to you? What would he say to your friends?
5. Search news stories for a modern-day martyr, someone who is facing persecution for Christ. Take a moment to pray for that person today.

## Section 3 Recap

Joshua obeyed, even though \_\_\_\_\_.

Elijah obeyed, even though \_\_\_\_\_.

Moses' parents obeyed, even though \_\_\_\_\_.

Stephen obeyed, even though \_\_\_\_\_.

I will obey, even though \_\_\_\_\_.

The courageous live a life of obedience, doing what is  
right, no matter what.

## Section 4: Courageous Influence

Our faith,  
our leadership,  
and our priorities  
can greatly influence others.

# *THE SCRIPT*

## **-INFLUENCE-**

**EXT. BACKYARD – AFTERNOON**

ADAM, NATHAN, SHANE, and DAVID sit around the table.

**NATHAN**

Man, if it wasn't for my faith in God, I'd be in a tailspin right now.

**ADAM**

(nods) Yeah, me too.

**DAVID**

(smirks) Look, guys, not everyone believes in that stuff. You guys are all religious, and that's fine, but you can't think religion's the only way to live your life.

**ADAM**

Religious?

**DAVID**

Yeah, (to NATHAN) it didn't work out for your parents. Didn't they get a divorce?

**NATHAN**

That's the problem: they were never married. Listen, my dad had six children, from three different women, and I was the fifth child. Before I was born, he had already left. I'm thirty-seven years old, and I've never met my biological father.

**DAVID**

Well, it looks like you turned out all right.

**NATHAN**

Well, that's because a man in my neighborhood named William Barrett mentored me as a teenager, taught me about God, and every Father's Day, he's the one that I call.

# ***The Scripture***

## **Joshua's Last Words Influence the Israelites**

*Joshua summoned all Israel, including its elders, leaders, judges, and officers, and said to them, "I am old, getting on in years, and you have seen for yourselves everything the LORD your God did to all these nations on your account, because it was the LORD your God who was fighting for you. .*

*. .*

*"Be very strong and continue obeying all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you do not turn from it to the right or left and so that you do not associate with these nations remaining among you. Do not call on the names of their gods or make an oath to them; do not worship them or bow down to them. Instead, remain faithful to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day. . . .*

*"I am now going the way of all the earth, and you know with all your heart and all your soul that none of the good promises the LORD your God made to you has failed. Everything was fulfilled for you; not one promise has failed. Since every good thing the LORD your God promised you has come about, so He will bring on you every bad thing until He has annihilated you from this good land the LORD your God has given you. If you break the covenant of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, and go and worship other gods, and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly disappear from this good land He has given you. . . ."*

*Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem and summoned Israel's elders, leaders, judges, and officers, and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the region beyond the Euphrates River, led him throughout the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave*

*the hill country of Seir to Esau as a possession, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt.*

*“Then I sent Moses and Aaron; I plagued Egypt by what I did there and afterward I brought you out. When I brought your fathers out of Egypt and you reached the Red Sea, the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen as far as the sea. Your fathers cried out to the LORD, so He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea over them, engulfing them. Your own eyes saw what I did to Egypt. After that, you lived in the wilderness a long time.*

*“Later, I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived beyond the Jordan. They fought against you, but I handed them over to you. You possessed their land, and I annihilated them before you. Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent for Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam. Instead, he repeatedly blessed you, and I delivered you from his hand.*

*“You then crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The people of Jericho—as well as the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites—fought against you, but I handed them over to you. I sent the hornet ahead of you, and it drove out the two Amorite kings before you. It was not by your sword or bow. I gave you a land you did not labor for, and cities you did not build, though you live in them; you are eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant.’*

*“Therefore, fear the LORD and worship Him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship Yahweh. But if it doesn’t please you to worship Yahweh, choose for yourselves today the one you will worship: the gods your fathers worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. As for me and my family, we will worship Yahweh.”*

*Joshua 23:2–3, 6–8, 14–16; 24:1–15*



## CHAPTER 8

# The Courage to Face Criticism

“So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?’”

NEHEMIAH 6:3

*“I will forgive those who have wronged me and reconcile with those I have wronged. I will walk in integrity as a man answerable to God, and I will seek to honor God, obey His Word, and do His will.”*

—THE RESOLUTION, *COURAGEOUS*

**N**o one is immune to criticism. It comes with breathing. And I’d rather be criticized for doing something than nothing. While it’s not as harsh as persecution, it is certainly more common.

Daniel Simmons is the pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church here in Albany, the largest African-American church in our region. We have worked together on many projects through the years—and not without criticism. Yet because we were willing to take a stand, other churches in our area are now seeking ways to partner across racial lines. It’s not always easy to overcome the critics, but it’s worth it.

Because of Daniel’s courage, two unique ministries have been birthed out of Mt. Zion. Their Boys to Men Ministry assists young males in their maturation to adulthood by providing character-building and life-fulfilling situations. In addition to this ministry, the Mt. Zion Summer Youth Academy for Boys serves as a mentoring program for boys, ages nine to fourteen. As a result, former participants often return and work with boys in the program.

We have a serious gang problem in Albany, Georgia. As we began working on *Courageous*, it was clear to us in dealing with the issues of fathers that we needed to address the consequences of fatherlessness.

Daniel's passion and ministry have reinforced that this was the right decision.

A critic would say, "What's the use?" But Daniel has led his church to try to change the culture. Others might say, "What difference can one church make? The problem is too far out of control." The pastor and people of Mt. Zion have said, "That may be the way it is, but we aren't going to accept it."

You may have heard similar criticisms. "What's the use?" "What difference can one person make?" "The problem is too far out of control." And sometimes, it's easy to give in to those criticisms.

Teddy Roosevelt certainly met his share of critics, but he faced them head-on. He said:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Have you ever seen a monument erected to a critic? When the critic throws stones, the visionary should take them and build a wall. Then if the critic wants to see what you've built, charge him admission to get through the gate.

Great ideas and leaders have a common enemy—the critic. Criticism is one of the enemy's favorite flaming arrows. He is the accuser of the brethren. Satan will attack those who threaten his strategy as the god of this age. If you stick your neck out, expect the enemy to take note of you.

I can tell you I've faced my share of opposition. I've got the scars to prove it. While some of the sweetest people I've known were God's people, some of the meanest people I've ever met have been in the church. (Please note that I do not assume the critic is a child of God.)

You may be part of a church where people seek power or want to run the church. Their name is legion, and they breed. You can't let those kinds of people derail you or cause you to give up on the church.

I challenge you to live the kind of life that causes people to disbelieve your critics when they speak ill of you. In my Bible beside Galatians 2:20 I have written, "Dead to flattery and flattening." We have to be both. The fact is this: those who can, act; those who can't, criticize. Find someone complaining about the way the ball bounces, and you'll probably find the person who never picked it up, or worse, dropped it.

With the success of Sherwood Pictures, we've had our share of flattery and flattening. Some think we're the greatest thing since sliced bread, while others think we're the worst thing since the Black Plague. The truth is somewhere in the middle. We don't show our films to movie critics for reviews because we don't make movies for critics. One person said to me, "If you don't show your movies to critics, people could assume they are lame or cheesy." I responded, "We don't care what critics think." We make movies to reach people for an audience of One. Our standard is not Hollywood; it's Him.

As we were filming *Courageous*, I found myself in a huddle with four of the five men who play male leads in the movie: Kevin Downes, Ken Bevel, Robert Amaya, and Alex Kendrick. We had an eyeball-to-eyeball discussion about how recognition and fame can feed pride. We asked God to deal with us if anything in our lives would hinder God using the film.

Praise and criticism come and go. Pleasing God is all that matters. To reply to a nasty remark with another nasty remark is like trying to remove dirt with mud. But to believe someone who feeds your fleshly pride is also dangerous. We have to avoid both. Praise undeserved is poison in disguise. Thomas Brooks wrote, "Flattery is the devil's invisible net."

With the increased awareness of Sherwood Pictures, we have been a target at times. I remind myself of what D. L. Moody said when questioned about his methods of evangelism, "I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it." It's not that we aren't willing to learn, but we

make movies for a greater purpose. We receive constructive criticism from people who love us, partner with us, and believe in us. Unknown critics and unsigned e-mails are never read. Why? Those opinions don't matter.

When I think of the courage to face criticism, my attention is drawn to Nehemiah. His story is set some time after Daniel and others had been taken captive to Babylon. The captivity lasted seventy years, and eventually Persia became the world power. When Artaxerxes assumed the throne of Persia he allowed Ezra to return to Jerusalem, and later Nehemiah followed. These two led a great restoration of the walls of Jerusalem and a revival among the people.

Nehemiah is one of the great leaders in Scripture. His story is told in black-and-white. He pulled no punches, and he never backed down from a conflict. He named his critics. When the critics called a meeting with Nehemiah, he boldly declared, "I am doing a great work and cannot come down" (6:3).

Nehemiah was also a man of prayer. His plans were birthed in prayer. His responses came in a prayer environment. Who he was in prayer prepared him to be who he was in public. Nehemiah's public life was empowered by his private life. Prayer was fundamental not supplemental. His work was bathed in prayer (see 1:4, 6; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29).

If you do anything great for God, you are going to need prayer support. Every project completed, victory won, and obstacle overcome in my ministry has been the result of prayer. The power of prayer cannot be measured.

Nehemiah was a great man in an influential position serving the king. He could not stay quiet while Jerusalem lay in ruins. Therefore, he was honest in his praying. Nehemiah wept, mourned, and fasted. He prayed day and night on behalf of the people of God (see Neh. 1:4ff). He was honest about the apostasy of the people, and he told God what the opposition was trying to do to derail the work.

The city of God was in ruins; the walls were in shambles. There was no king, prophet, or priest to stand for God. Nonetheless, God orchestrated events to move Nehemiah, a cupbearer to the king of Persia, out of exile (1:11).

Nehemiah wasn't merely a cupbearer; he was also a builder. Nehemiah had a God-given vision, as the city needed walls if it was going to withstand enemy attacks. The ruined walls had been a problem for years, but something had to be done. Nehemiah was God's man to do it, though the task wouldn't come without difficulty.

We need walls in our own lives. It's not courageous just to "trust the Lord." We need to put feet to our prayers. We need to build four walls in our lives: faith, courage, integrity, and prayer. Surrounding our hearts with these four walls of defense will allow us to stand in an evil day.

Fortunately the people embraced the vision and followed Nehemiah. They were ready to rebuild the wall. But remember, not everyone will be happy when you start to do something great for God. There are people, even in the Christian community, who want you to fail. Jealousy and envy will lead people to attack you.

Never let a loser tell you how to win!

Critics will never be an endangered species, but we should ask God to create a spiritual environment where they can't breed. If Nehemiah had caved into critics, the wall would have never been rebuilt. You must have the courage to withstand the critic.

By God's grace we have an environment at Sherwood where we are not a breeding ground for cynics and critics. At the same time I know we are one malcontent away from someone trying to stir things up. So we pray and practice unity on every front.

For Nehemiah, Sanballat was one of those guys who just wouldn't stop. He wouldn't move his church letter or see the error of his ways. Scripture clearly reveals his attitude: "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard that someone had come to seek the well-being of the Israelites, they were greatly displeased" (2:10). These guys were ticked off.

Critics make three kinds of statements: it can't be done; it shouldn't be done; it won't be done. The courageous know that it can, know that it should, and know that it will. The way you react to criticism reveals if you are courageous or intimidated.

I know people who want to be leaders, but they're afraid of criticism. They live with fear, and they will never build a wall or leave a legacy. A heresy floating around says if you are doing God's will, then everything

will work out without a hitch. Where is the chapter and verse in the Bible that says that? The fact is that change makes some people angry, and the anger can be devilish.

You are going to face critics. To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, and be nothing. If you are doing God's will, expect opposition. Face the task with tenacity, and face your problems in prayer (see 1 John 5:4).

Do you know why Nehemiah received such hostile criticism? Because if he was successful, Sanballat's economic security would be jeopardized. If Jerusalem was rebuilt, it would attract business and cut into Samaria's economic supremacy. It was Sanballat's strategy to "lower their self-esteem, weaken their resolve, and destroy their morale"<sup>2</sup> so he could keep things status quo. Critics only act in their own best interest.

We have a section in our local newspaper called the Squawkbox, a place where cowards can anonymously leave a few sentences of criticism or praise. (The criticism outweighs the praise one hundred to one.) I've been the target a few times. My motives have been questioned, and our church has been attacked. I choose not to respond because it wouldn't do any good. Proverbs says a harsh word stirs up anger. If you really want to get them, don't respond and sic the Lord on them (see Neh. 4:4–6).

Nehemiah met the opposition with prayer, but he also kept working. We need to do the same: after you've prayed, go back to work. The enemy will try to get you to start arguing. Agonizing and organizing are two sides of the same coin. We work and we wait. We watch and we pray.

In *Courageous* the group of officers makes a commitment to take responsibility as godly husbands and fathers. Adam Mitchell makes a speech representative of the vow that all the men have made. Then, knowing there will be critics, he acknowledges them head-on.

Some men may hear this and mock it or ignore it, but I tell you that as a father, you are accountable to God for the position of influence He has given you.

You can't afford to fall asleep at the wheel, only to wake up one day and realize that your job or your hobbies have no eternal value, but the souls of your children do. Some men will hear this and agree

with it but have no resolve to live it out. They will end up living for themselves and waste the opportunity to leave a legacy for the next generation.

But there are some men who, regardless of our mistakes in the past and regardless of what our fathers did not do for us, will give the strength of our arms and the rest of our days to love God with all that we are and teach our children to do the same. And we are inviting any man whose heart is courageous and willing to join us in this resolution. The world wants the hearts of your children, and they will fight for their devotion.

Opposition can take a hundred forms. Sanballat and Tobiah first ridiculed Nehemiah and mocked the Jews (Neh. 4:1–3). As you continue to read, you see that the opposition began to mock God’s people. The Hebrew word for *mock* means to stammer or to stutter. The critics kept repeating their negative comments, hoping to discourage the people and their work. Chuck Swindoll writes, “Part of the unwritten job requirements for every leader is the ability to handle criticism. That’s part of the leadership package. If you never get criticized, chances are you aren’t getting anything done.”<sup>3</sup>

I’ve met the relatives of Sanballat and Tobiah. You’ll find them on every expedition, adventure, and project. They not only threw verbal barbs, but they also mocked the work that had already been done. Critics don’t need a reason to criticize. Oscar Wilde asked, “What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”<sup>4</sup>

If criticism doesn’t work, they will start to threaten you. Nehemiah’s opponents became furious and fought the work at every turn (4:7–8). Nehemiah’s response? “We prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night” (4:9).

Watch and work. Stay focused. These critics didn’t just criticize the workers; they challenged the Lord God. Those who oppose the work of God are opposing God Himself. Nehemiah made sure the people stayed focused. He kept them on task. His first response was prayer. His second was to set watchmen on the wall.

Scripture reminds us to be alert, to watch and pray, and to stand firm. We need to stand strong when people are trying to knock us down or stop the work we are doing. The greater the progress in the work, the greater the criticism. The more successful the work, the more intense the attacks.

The enemies of Nehemiah began to use a little psychological warfare. They worked to instill discouragement and fear in the hearts of the people (Neh. 4:14 and 6:9, 13). They threatened to tell King Artaxerxes that Nehemiah was a traitor, but their threats didn't rattle Nehemiah. Remember, he had been cupbearer to the king and had already earned his trust.

If you are going to face criticism and survive it, you must be determined, steadfast, confident, and bold. One of the great tests for a leader is the ability to persevere. Most of us quit too soon. We let the critics win because we lack the tenacity to finish the task.

Critics want to convince you they have greater support on their side than you do. God doesn't bless critics. The devil rejoices when we buckle under pressure and when we blink in a showdown. Nehemiah handed out swords, placed the people in position, and kept working. "When our enemies heard that we knew their scheme and that God had frustrated it, every one of us returned to his own work on the wall" (4:15).

If you want to drive a critic crazy, keep doing what God told you to do. You can't answer every accusation, but you can build a wall. Nothing troubles a troublemaker like seeing the work go on. In his book *Stuff Christians Like*, Jonathan Acuff writes, "Hate from others is like moss, it can only grow on stagnant objects. The motion of following your calling repels hate."

Roy Laurin writes, "Never stop working to fight. Be ready to fight and repel the invader but always keep up the work. A man's greatest defense is the work he is doing. If he constantly answers the attacks made on him he cannot work and if he does not work, he will not be able to fulfill the purpose of his life."<sup>5</sup>

Paul asked, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Nehemiah never lost sight of his goal and completed the wall in fifty-two days. How? The people had a mind to work. They were inspired by Nehemiah's courage, and Nehemiah's work was vindicated. Every move of his critics was met by faith, prayer, and preparation. God gave him the



strategies to match the attacks of the enemy. At every turn Nehemiah had an answer for the need of the hour.

In chapter 6 Nehemiah's critics tried to trap him by appealing for a private meeting, but Nehemiah was too smart and too wise to fall for that trap. "'Come, let's meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.' But they were planning to harm me" (6:1-2).

Nehemiah was quick to respond. "I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (6:3-4). They came at him "four times" with "the same proposal." The courageous need to discern between someone who is sincere and someone with an ulterior motive.

You must have the courage to confront critics. They can't be ignored, and they won't change because it's not in their DNA. Most critics are either jealous, threatened, or uninformed. The only reason they have influence is because we have let them. If we are going to be people of courage, the critic can no longer control our lives.

It's easy to run from critics. For the last twenty plus years I've pastored the same church. I decided to plant my flag and give my life to one place. Running would have been easier, but staying was God's plan for my life. Today I am blessed to pastor a church that walks in unity.

I'm amazed by the way this congregation accepts my leadership and believes in the vision God has given me. I'm grateful for the men and women who pray daily for me. I love the young people who sit down front in the worship services. I am blessed with deacons "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). There is so much about Sherwood to love.

I must admit there were times I let a handful spoil it for me. No matter who you are or what you do, not everyone is going to agree with you. Just do what God says and let someone else worry about the critics. Be careful who you listen to. I have a handful of men who have permission to speak into my life when they see something that shouldn't be there. They tell me if I've said something inappropriate in a message. They confront me. The key is they love me unconditionally and want the best for me.

What happened because Nehemiah didn't stop the work to respond to critics? The wall was completed in fifty-two days. My advice to you is simple: never let someone who has done nothing tell you how to do anything.

## — Think Courageously —

1. Think of a time when you faced criticism even though you knew you were right.
2. What was the criticism? Was it accurate?
3. How did you handle the situation?
4. How could you have handled it differently?
5. Think of a few people whom you could invite to be your constructive critics, who would correct you in love or call you out when you're out of line. Ask at least one of them to be your constructive critic. Maybe you could do the same for them too!

## CHAPTER 9

# The Courage to Stir Up the Fire

“Therefore, I remind you to keep ablaze the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. So don’t be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord.”

2 TIMOTHY 1:6–8

*“A man in my neighborhood named William Barrett mentored me as a teenager. He taught me about God. Every Father’s Day, he’s the one I call.”*

—NATHAN HAYES, *COURAGEOUS*

**W**hatever I am today for God is largely the result of people who invested in my life. Whether they were Sunday school teachers growing up, my youth minister, or heroes in my life, all have impacted, molded, and shaped me into who I am today.

One man in particular who impacted my life was Frank Favazza. Frank was a layman and a homebuilder by trade. In reality he was a mentor to untold numbers of men along the way. When I was a starving seminary student, Frank would take me out to lunch, usually to the best steak house in Kansas City, and buy me a meal. It was his way of getting my undivided attention for several hours as he disciplined me and taught me out of the Word of God. His life was his message.

In Frank’s home were dozens of Bibles. He would take a Bible and go from Genesis to Revelation studying one particular word. Whether the word was *faith*, *truth*, *grace*, or a dozen others, he wanted to read what God said about that subject in its context. I wish I owned one of those Bibles today.

In my twenties I was introduced to one of the great mentors of the last fifty years, Max Barnett. Max was the head of the BSU at the University of Oklahoma. Actually Max was a disciple maker cleverly disguised as a BSU director. Thousands have been impacted by his life and ministry.

There is a bland predictability about Christianity today. It seems we are the only believers on the planet who are afraid to stand up for what we believe. While the world will never compromise, we compromise easily and often.

Proverbs 25:26 says, “A righteous person who yields to the wicked is like a muddied spring or a polluted well.” We claim to be individuals, but we look and sound like clones of the culture. No one seems to be in the mood to be different. I’m not talking about being weird; I am talking about making an impact. It’s time to raise the bar.

The first time I read the resolution scene in *Courageous*, every fiber of my being wanted to stand up and cheer. It’s a call to be courageous, take action, and return to the principles of godliness. When we take our commitments seriously, we make significant inroads into the lives of others.

Paul reminds us “to walk worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph. 4:1). John said we are to be in the world but not of the world. That doesn’t mean we are to avoid non-Christians, nor does it mean we become a chameleon. It means we’ve been delivered from a desire to follow the attitudes of the culture. What Jesus said about taking up the cross and dying to self is not in fine print; it’s headline news in the Gospels.

Paul’s words to Timothy about the last days reads like any news site on the Internet:

But know this: Difficult times will come in the last days. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people! (2 Tim. 3:1–5)

How do we stand in difficult days? We can’t do it in our own strength. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us. We need others to encourage and equip us. We know the need; we need someone to model the *how* for us. We need to see living witnesses of the power of the Holy Spirit to radically change lives. We need to be stirred up. Emotions will pass, but we need to

be stirred in the depths of our being. We can get stirred up at an event, but I'm talking about a lifelong process of growing and maturing.

Now is the time.

In a recent sermon at Sherwood, Tom Elliff asked a series of pointed questions: If not now, when? If not you, who? If not here, where? If not by prayer, then how? Jesus calls us to a narrow road, the cross life, a radical new way of thinking. His call is to "be with Him" and to "follow Him." We are to "learn from Him."

As spiritual infants we need help. We can't feed ourselves, change ourselves, or walk on our own. We need someone to carry us until we are able to take care of ourselves. We need mentors and role models who will show us how they live out their faith. We need people to pour into our lives who haven't lost their way. We must have others in our lives who will not allow us to accept average or status quo as the norm.

Much of what I see targeted at young people is just watered-down Christianity, if it could even be called Christianity at all. With all the talent and technology we have, you would think we could figure out what truth is. Unfortunately some of the leading voices to the younger generation are more concerned about being cool than Christlike. They pat themselves on the back for the things they are able to do because of their "freedom" in Christ. They speak little of the cross, dying to self, and being a world changer.

I'm discovering that the harder I preach and the higher I set the demands, the more response I'm getting out of young people. I get the feeling that you're nauseated by compromise and apathy within the church. You've figured out that there's something more. And you're just waiting for someone to point you in the right direction, to fuel the fire. In his book *The Table of Inwardness*, Calvin Miller tells the story of an antique wooden box from the nineteenth century that had a lid with large red and black letters on it which read: DANGER! DYNAMITE! But Miller wrote, "The last time I saw it, it was filled with common paraphernalia that could be found in any workroom." The box designated for dynamite and power was filled with nothing more than flammable junk.

This illustration defines our problem. We say we have power, but far too many accept defeat as normal. We have the Spirit within us, but we live in fear of our foe. We talk about dynamite, but we are duds. While we affirm

the book of Acts, we are light-years removed from any evidence of such power. The leaders of the work of God in Acts weren't, by and large, professional preachers; they were laymen. Peter was a fisherman by trade, and Paul was a tent maker. However, through their personal encounters with Jesus Christ, they were filled with a fire that spread through the people and left countless believers in its wake.

Encouragement from Christ-centered people fuels others in their faith.

I have a friend who is the pastor of a large church. He and his wife have just taken in a twenty-four-year-old homeless man and are helping him get his GED. He sent me a note telling me he had shown the young man *Facing the Giants* to encourage him in his journey.

We see this principle in the life of one of the characters portrayed in *Courageous*, Shane Fuller. As an officer, he paraded around as a committed believer, good father, and respectable coworker. However, it is later revealed that he has been hiding his true identity. All was not as it appeared to be. His poor choices nearly cost him his family, but a fellow officer, Adam, steps in to help him win back the heart of his son. Adam becomes a mentor for the young boy as he struggles through the consequences of his father's poor decisions.

One of my prayers is that God would raise up mentors and disciple makers. A mentor doesn't necessarily mean a wise grandfather. A mentor is a role model, counselor, or guide. If you're an eighteen-year-old, the sixteen-year-olds look up to you. If you're a sixteen-year-old, the thirteen-year-olds look up to you. If you're a thirteen-year-old, the ten-year-olds look up to you. As a mentor, you make sure what they're looking up to is a Christlike example, while also guiding them and lifting them to your spiritual level.

We find a biblical model for mentoring: Moses mentored Joshua, Barnabas poured his life into John Mark, and Paul cared for Timothy as his own son. Of course, Jesus called and taught His disciples. He invested in them, knowing He would one day leave them.

Paul was concerned about the future of the gospel. He was passing the torch to young Timothy who was, at times, fearful and timid. I'm amazed that from the talent pool that was probably available to Paul, he would choose Timothy. Paul selected a young man who wasn't in the best health.

The apostle reminded him to stir up the gift of God within him and not let the world intimidate him.

Paul poured his life into Timothy. The old apostle knew the fires of the early days of the church could go out if the next generation did not take seriously what had been entrusted to them. Paul called Timothy to stand above the crowd (see 2 Tim. 1:5–8; 2:1–7, 15; 3:1; 4:1–5).

Paul knew the day was coming when people wouldn't put up with sound doctrine. He didn't say they wouldn't enjoy it or appreciate it; he said they wouldn't endure it or put up with it. He wanted to raise up a generation that would be able to digest the meat of the Word. He didn't want the body of Christ trying to live off cotton candy.

I love junk food. It tastes better than healthy food. Who wants broccoli when you can eat a Butterfinger? But if you live on junk food, you'll die because of it. Ron Dunn said, "History teaches us, the farther every generation takes us is one step further from the source of the flame."

Paul was coming down the home stretch of his life. He wanted to make sure he left the gospel in good hands. Paul mentioned several men in his letter to Timothy. But two of those, in particular, could be pictures of people you know or possibly even you (2 Tim. 4:9–10).

First Paul mentioned Demas. At one point he had been on Paul's staff. Think about what kind of guy you had to be to make it on Paul's staff. But things had changed. "Demas because he loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (v. 10). Demas had the same potential as Timothy, and maybe that's why Paul mentioned him. He didn't want to see timid Timothy go down the same path. What a contrast we see here: Paul was in prison facing death, and Demas moved to the big city to live the life of ease. He didn't want to pay the price. He had the "let me first" attitude (Luke 9).

Then there was John Mark. He had accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, but he got homesick and left before the work was completed. On the second journey, Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways over whether or not to take John Mark. Now, years later, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Bring Mark with you, for he is useful to me in the ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11). Apparently Barnabas made a minister out of John Mark. Failure doesn't have to be final. God redeemed John Mark's failures.

God has allowed me to mentor several in the ministry. My love for them is deeper than I can express. I've ordained them and tried to put the fear of God in them. I try to invest in those young men. Although all of us are busy, many of them call, text, or e-mail me to seek wisdom about how to handle a situation.

One of those guys is Garrett Grubbs, our youth minister at Sherwood. He shared the following:

Michael became my pastor when I was eleven years old. Twenty years later I serve alongside him as the student minister at Sherwood. I have been saved, baptized, married, and ordained under Michael's ministry. He has walked with my wife and me on the mountaintops and through the valleys of life. We consider Michael as a spiritual father. He has walked with our family through the loss of two children and two failed adoptions, and he has celebrated with us through the adoption of our son this year.

Michael has taught me that success in ministry is not the approval of man but obedience to Christ. Michael has taught us to glean wisdom from men that have lived out the faith well. One of the ways he helps sharpen us is by sending us books and messages that have shaped his life. His investment in my life can't be measured!

Start now by making an immeasurable difference in someone else's life. By simply being a Christian, you're a step ahead of many, putting you in a position to lead them in the right direction. Make an effort to represent the best version of you, everywhere you go. You never know when you're being a role model.

One of my dad's chores growing up was to put wood on the fire in the mornings. He had to stoke the coals, blow on them, and add a little kindling to the fire before he put the logs on. That's what Paul urged Timothy to do. He called him to "keep ablaze the gift of God" (2 Tim. 1:6). God is not going to do for us what we are supposed to do ourselves. There is a difference between God's work and man's responsibility.

He was to rekindle the fire of God, not his own fire. All these exhortations from Paul were the outgrowth of this one command: kindle



afresh! It could be that Timothy was in danger of getting into a rut. He wasn't making the progress Paul thought he should be making.

We are lacking people who are stirred up. God never wastes words. He never says to a man who is awake, "Wake up!" He never says to a man standing up, "Stand up!" or to a man lying down, "Lie down!" Nor does he say to a man who is already on fire, "Kindle afresh!" Paul called for commitment to an "above and beyond" mentality. The devil works to convince us that those early days of reckless abandonment to Christ need to be toned down. Paul reminded Timothy that he needed a burning heart.

Many of us have bailed out on God over less significant things than what Timothy faced. He was facing growing persecution, possible imprisonment, and constant attacks from the Judaizers and Gnostics. We lose our fire too easily. We allow the fear of criticism to extinguish our fire. We worry about what others think or how they will whisper about us in the girls' bathroom. We worry about popularity and approval and follow the path of compromise.

There are many strange fires today. The prosperity gospel, suggesting that God will make His followers wealthy, will extinguish the true fire and only works if you live in a materialistic, self-centered society. We're also faced with the strange fire of a watered-down gospel and a compromised church. Another strange fire is "spirituality." We see Oprah and other celebrities embracing it, most not even understanding it's a hodgepodge of various religions, all leading to a dead end. It's the faith of a postmodern, relative-truth world. The courageous will long for the fire of God in their bones.

Timothy didn't need a shot of adrenaline or enthusiasm or a pregame pep talk; he needed power from the Holy Spirit. Like most of us, as time went on, Timothy's emotions began to wane. Life can wear you down or make you fearful. Timothy faced opposition inside and outside the church. Maybe he was close to burnout. Paul encouraged him: "Kindle afresh." Literally, keep the fire alive, fan the embers into a flame, and don't let the fire die out.

J. Wilbur Chapman said, "Anything that diminishes my vision for Christ, or takes away my taste for Bible study, or cramps my prayer life or makes Christian work difficult, is wrong for me and I must, as a Christian, turn away from it."

Recently I observed a large youth conference, and what I saw broke my heart. The young people came filing in, heads down, many of them listening to their iPods. They looked like they were walking into a funeral, not into a conference with a band and great speaker. Come on, step up—we need a new level of commitment!

Because of movies like *Gladiator*, we are all familiar with the brutality of the Roman games. A courageous monk named Telemachus lived in a day when the games were still popular. He went to Rome and followed the crowds into the Colosseum to see what he, as one individual, might be able to do to stop the games. When the first pair of gladiators came out and drew their swords, he leaped into the arena and ran between the two fighters and cried out, “In the name of our Master, stop fighting!” The gladiators hesitated, but the furious, blood-thirsty crowd stampeded into the arena and beat the monk to death. Upon seeing his dead body, the crowd withdrew as a silence fell over that massive Colosseum. The emperor decreed an end to the games. Why? Because one man had the courage to say, “Enough is enough.”

It’s time to stir up the gift, to jump into the arena. It’s time to demand a higher calling than playing games. The sides aren’t balanced; we are outnumbered. When James Calvert went as a missionary to the cannibals in the Fiji Islands, the captain of the ship said, “You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages.” Calvert replied, “We died before we came here.”

We don’t have time for average. Average is climbing halfway up the mountain and stopping. Average is as close to great as it is to bad. Average is a picture of a life that has lost zeal, passion, and fire.

We must call people to the fire. The coals have been cold for so long that it takes time to stoke them and fan the flame again. The altar of repentance is needed to burn away the impurities that dull the image of Christ in us.

Peter calls us to have a “sincere mind,” a mind of purity. Plato used the word to refer to pure, uncontaminated reasoning. The Greek literally means “sun judged,” as a piece of pottery was held up to the sun to see if there were any flaws or cracks in it. When the fire of God is stirred within us, we will allow ourselves to be examined by the Son.

What will happen if we don't call out this generation to stir up the fire and sell out to the Savior? The fire will go out. The church will be irrelevant. The blessings will be removed. We will be in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

I'm praying for God to give us a new generation like those who influenced my life. Mentors who never wavered from the Word. Christians who stood courageously to call the church to repentance and holiness.

The Scriptures give us numerous guidelines to apply to our lives.

1. Wake up (see 1 Thess. 5:1–11).
2. Clean up (see 1 John 2:28–3:3).
3. Grow up (see Rom. 13:14).
4. Stir up (see 2 Tim. 1:6).

If the devil can't keep us from being saved, he will do the next best thing—he will make us content with average. He'll get us to leave the life of commitment and accept the life of defeat.

What could happen if we took seriously the command to “keep ablaze the gift of God” and to invest in another follower like Timothy? The church would grow by multiplication instead of addition. Within a few years, we would have a worldwide impact.

Let me set up a hypothetical situation for you. Let's suppose, as a pastor, I was able to preach to 100,000 people every day, 365 days a year, and suppose that 4,000 came to Christ every day. At the end of one year, there would be 1,460,000 new believers. In just sixteen years, there would be 23,360,000. That would be impressive, wouldn't it?

Now let's suppose I used the principle of multiplication. Suppose I find a young Timothy, lead him to Christ, and stir the fire, leading by example for six months. Then I find another young follower, and Timothy also finds another young man and begins to work with him. Every six months we (and they) lead someone else to Christ and mentor them. At the end of one year, we would have four, and at the end of two years, sixteen. At the end of sixteen years we would have four billion followers of Jesus Christ!

How is that possible? We take seriously the call to invest ourselves in others. We don't allow the fire to go out in our lives or theirs. We lead them

to a point where they can lead others, and the process continues.

So get stirred up. Find your Timothy. Who will be first to answer that call?

## — Think Courageously —

1. Name someone who has led you in your spiritual walk.
2. How has he or she helped you?
3. Who is someone you could mentor today?
4. Take some time to read the passages for each of the four guidelines on page 168.
5. Now think of four things you can do today to apply those principles.

## CHAPTER 10

# The Courage Catalyst

“Therefore, we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

HEBREWS 13:6

*“It’s time to rise up and answer the call that God has given to you, and to say, ‘I will. I will. I will.’”*

—ADAM MITCHELL, *COURAGEOUS*

I’ve written about several of my favorite Bible characters in this book. Dozens of other examples are found in the Scriptures. The one I find myself most attracted to is our Lord Jesus. He inspires me to courageously face legalism and dead religion. He empowers me to be courageous. He gives me courage instead of fear. He has defeated everything I could ever be afraid of. Hebrews 12:1–3 says,

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God’s throne. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won’t grow weary and lose heart.

Jesus would not turn away from Gethsemane or the cross. At every point Jesus pleased His heavenly Father. Warren Wiersbe notes, “Jesus lived and ministered on earth in the power of the Spirit (Acts 10:37–38), and so must we. It is unfortunate that so many believers think that Jesus served as He did simply because He was God and exercised His divine powers. They argue that because they don’t have the same divine nature as

Jesus, God can't expect too much from them; but this kind of thinking is all wrong. When He served here on earth, Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit, prayer and the Word of God, and these divine resources are available to us today.”<sup>1</sup>

Far too many believers fall short of God's expectations. Fear, cowardice, and a thousand other things cripple us. Instead of walking in victory, we just limp along and get along. The landscape of the Old Testament is littered with the bodies of God's people, long forgotten, who died in the wilderness because of their unbelief and lack of courage. The history of the twenty-first-century American church may be the story of masses of church members who lived insipid, uninspiring lives and settled for less than God's best.

Unfortunately the majority of God's people live less than courageous lives. They are marked by defeat more than victory, fear more than faith, timidity more than boldness. Why? The sin of settling. Settling for second best. Settling for what is comfortable. Settling for less than God designed us to be. It's not enough to be good enough.

We find the command to “be strong and courageous” twenty-six times in the Old Testament. Three times we see the phrase, “Be strong and let your heart take courage.” We obviously identify those words with Joshua. This great leader is my Old Testament hero. His name means “Jehovah saves.” Joshua was a courageous soldier, father, and leader who called those around him to be courageous. His courage came because he was faithful. Unlike the majority of his peers, he never backed down from a battle or stopped believing God for the land.

This is no time to stand still or hesitate when there is so much to be done. We will find courage in the Word of God and the will of God. Living the courageous life is being willing to pray, “Not my will but God's be done.”

We are in a battle. Battles require preparation. For the believer, prep time is spent in the Word and in prayer. Joshua was told to meditate on the Word. The fact that Jesus spent time alone in prayer reminds me there is no power to face the battles of life without the Word and prayer. Alan Redpath wrote that a person God uses has to “know what it is to pay the price of a closed door.” Jesus was a person of prayer and a student of His own Word.

He would go off alone to pray because He knew “the price of a closed door.” If God in the flesh needed time to communicate with God the Father, can we do any less?

Jesus quoted the Scriptures in a variety of settings. He reminded the Pharisees of what God had said when they tried to twist the Scriptures for their benefit. He cleaned out the temple so it could be a house of prayer. The Word is “living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12), and all the promises of God find their yes in Christ (see 2 Cor. 1:20).

If you want to find courage, get on your knees and get in the Word. The pages of Scripture are filled with the life stories of His champions. They weren’t famous because they were talented or gifted but because they had the courage to stand. They never quit. Patriarchs, prophets, and first-century preachers all drew courage from an intimate relationship with the living God. They wouldn’t bow or bend to anyone but God and God alone.

Every page and every story drives me to Jesus. He is the greatest game changer, difference maker, and influencer in human history. Philip Schaff points out, “Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, He shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since and produces effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”[2](#)

Jesus faced critics, cynics, and skeptics and never blinked. He faced the devil in the wilderness and never backed down from the Word. He faced the cross and never looked back. He was born to die. He chose the hour and place of His coming at Bethlehem. He chose the time and place of His death at Golgatha on an old rugged cross. From birth until death, the Son of Man had total control of His life. Men did not take His life; He gave it freely. When His body was laid in a borrowed tomb, it looked as if the devil had won. It appeared that mortal men like Herod, Caiaphas, and Pilate had

stopped Him. But three days later Jesus stepped out of the tomb. That resurrection power is ours today.

We live in difficult times. Our brothers and sisters around the world are being persecuted for their faith. In many lands becoming a Christian is a literal death sentence. This world is not evolving into something better. It is becoming more and more like the days of the Roman Empire when Christians were tortured and persecuted for believing in Jesus as the Son of God. This is no time for cowards. We need courageous leaders. Will you be one? Will you stand, even if you have to stand alone? Will you find yourself in the company of those we've examined in these pages, or will you be another forgotten life buried in a graveyard of mediocrity?

In AD 168 an old bishop named Polycarp was led before an angry crowd to be killed for his faith. As the bishop of Smyrna, he was the last living link to the original disciples, having studied under the apostle John. The Roman government tried to get Polycarp to deny Christ. He said, "Eighty-six years I have served the Lord Jesus Christ, and He never once wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

At that point the Roman proconsul threatened to throw Polycarp to the wild beasts or burn him at the stake. He courageously responded, "You threaten me with fire which will burn for an hour and then will go out, but you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment of God reserved for the everlasting torment of the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring on the beasts, or the fire, or whatever you choose; you shall not move me to deny Christ, my Lord and Savior."<sup>3</sup>

In his final prayer Polycarp prayed, "O Father, I thank You that You have called me to this day and hour and have counted me worthy to receive my place along with the number of the holy martyrs."<sup>4</sup>

God's Word, God's Son, and His indwelling Spirit empower us to be courageous. We have nothing to fear in this life or in death.

## — Think Courageously —

1. Which scene from Jesus' life most inspires you to be courageous?
2. What is your biggest obstacle in living courageously?



3. How does Jesus overcome that obstacle?
4. How will living courageously make your life look more like the life of Jesus?
5. If you're ready, take the time right now to make the resolution on pages 160-61.

## Section 4 Recap

Joshua influenced others by \_\_\_\_\_.

Nehemiah influenced others by \_\_\_\_\_.

Paul influenced others by \_\_\_\_\_.

Jesus influenced others by \_\_\_\_\_.

I will influence others by \_\_\_\_\_.

# Conclusion:

## We Need YOU!

“Let no one despise your youth; instead, you should be an example to the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

1 TIMOTHY 4:12

*“What I want for you is that you seek the Lord and that you trust Him even if means you are standing alone. . . . You got me?”*

—ADAM MITCHELL TO HIS TEENAGE SON DYLAN, *COURAGEOUS*

**B**efore becoming a pastor, I was a youth minister for fifteen years. I was blessed to come along when the emphasis on discipleship was beginning. I was never cut out to be a “cookies and Kool-Aid” youth minister. I wasn’t interested in babysitting students because I believed (and still believe) they needed—and wanted—to be challenged.

I wanted my students to be courageous on their school campuses. Today dozens of men and women who came through our ministry are serving the Lord. I regularly get a text, e-mail, or tweet from one of them telling me what God is doing in their lives.

We often hear that Jesus’ disciples could have been teenagers. If Jesus entrusted His message to teenagers then, why would He do anything less now? He believed you could handle truth and a worldwide ministry, and I am here to issue that same calling.

My expectations are high for this generation. We can’t change the culture and reach the nations without you. International evangelist Sammy Tippitt shared the following story with me:

Before the collapse of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany was a divided nation. West Germans lived in freedom,

while East Germans lived under the strict ideology of Communism. Berlin was one of the most unique cities in the world, divided by the Berlin Wall. East German soldiers stood in towers on the east side of the wall, poised to shoot and kill fellow countrymen who tried to escape to the West.

Christians were especially targeted with persecution. Huge cathedrals were virtually empty due to pressure from the Communists. A young person had to make a decision at the age of fourteen whether to be a part of the Free German Youth (Communist youth organization) or a member of the church. If they chose the church, they were limited in their educational opportunities. Consequently, young people left the church en masse.

In that context I (Sammy) ministered to the youth of East Germany, even though it was illegal for them to meet with me. I once met secretly with a group of young people in the basement of an old castle. I encouraged them to follow Jesus fully. At the close of the Bible study, one young person with tears in her eyes told me, "I am a new believer. But I have sin in my life, and I don't know what to do."

She began weeping, confessing, and repenting of sin and asked God to enable her to serve Him completely. She cried to God, "I am willing to serve You and follow You." Then she added a phrase, "No matter what it costs." The rest of the young people went to their knees, crying out to God with the same surrendered heart and concluded with the same phrase, "No matter what it costs."

Two friends and I had gone to East Germany to minister to those young people. But the truth is that they ministered to us. They taught us the meaning of true courage. They faced the loss of education, the possibility of poverty, and a future filled with difficulties. Yet they prayed, "No matter what the cost." They drew courage from the cross.

What did it produce? A spirit of revival gripped the youth of East Germany. Within two years of that meeting, I again spoke to the youth of their city, Dresden. This time more than 2,000 filled the service. Several years later the wall came down. I feel certain that the courage of those East German youth played a role in freedom

coming to the nation. It was the power of their prayer, “No matter what the cost.”

I’m asking God to raise up young men and women in this land who will pray for God to use them no matter what the cost. Thom and Jess Rainer in their book *The Millennials* make the point that for many Millennials (those born from 1980 to 2000), Christianity is a family heirloom rather than a faith commitment. Their research discovered that only 13 percent of Millennials mention religion, faith, or spirituality as an important part of life. Only 65 percent of Millennials were willing to call themselves Christian in even the broadest sense of the word.

Millennials’ most common belief about life after death is “no one really knows” (34 percent). Thom and Jess Rainer’s research analysis reveals that 67 percent of Millennials say they rarely or never “read the Bible, Torah, Koran, or other sacred writings. Only 46 percent agree strongly that God is a real being, not just a concept. Four in ten agree strongly or somewhat that Satan is not a real being but just a symbol of evil. Half of Millennials believe that when Jesus walked this earth He sinned like other people, and only half agree that Jesus is the only way to heaven.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

The simple fact that you’re reading this book—I hope—means that most of these statistics don’t apply to you. But, friends, you’ve got your work cut out for you. Of course, pastors like myself are doing our best to lead you and train your parents (trust me, we parents don’t have it all figured out either), but *you* are the one poised to make the greatest impact. You are the one there fighting in the trenches of the spiritual battle evidenced by the numbers above. We’re behind you, we’re here to guide you and teach you, but the fact remains: *we need you*.

We need God to move on the hearts of this generation like He did in the 1940s during the days of Youth for Christ. We need another Jesus Movement. We need another college revival like the one at Asbury College. These movements changed lives, impacted a generation, and shook the church. Out of these movements came some of today’s great Christian leaders. Are you willing to step up and change your generation?

Did you know the term *teenager* is a relatively new one? In their book *Do Hard Things*, Alex and Brett Harris note that the first documented use of

the word *teenager* occurred in an issue of *Reader's Digest* in 1941, less than seventy-five years ago.<sup>2</sup> It's an age that marketers look at, study, and target. Today your age group sets the trends, chooses the music, watches the movies, and buys the clothes. Yet before the mid-twentieth century your demographic was pretty much, in a sense, nonexistent. In the time preceding adulthood, you either went to school, worked the farm, or learned a trade. There was little time for extracurricular activities. In reality the clothing was not that different from what adults wore.

Things have changed a little bit, wouldn't you say?

As much as things have changed, one thing is constant: the period of time between childhood and maturity is difficult. It's tough being a teenager. And I know—even as I say it—that I don't fully comprehend the pressures you face today. But I also know that we need you to overcome. We need you rise up as a courageous generation who will take your place and embrace your responsibilities.

Together, we can turn the tide.

Because of the decay of the home and the influence of media and entertainment, so many students are languishing in a cesspool of uncertainty. They don't know who they are or why they are here. They don't understand absolutes. If they have a belief system, they may not be able to define it or even articulate it. And they are biblically illiterate. They need radical change.

*They need you.*

They need someone in the trenches with them to show them the way. They need someone to model courage, to face criticism and persecution, to maintain faith and to have the biblical knowledge to back it up. *They need you.*

*We need you.*

The graying church is leading us into a cemetery. Everywhere I go, I challenge pastors and churches to reach the next generation. I have challenged my church to be the church where all generations are wanted. A place that an alienated kid can call home. A hotbed for raising up the next generation of preachers and missionaries.

I am grateful for the adults who served in the children's and youth ministries while my girls were growing up. I'm grateful for leaders like Jay

Strack, founder and president of Student Leadership University, who believed we needed to start investing in students as leaders. By the grace of God both our girls have chosen to serve the Lord. Erin uses her gifts in the world of entertainment, and Hayley is a gifted writer and photographer with a heart for missions and orphans.

Terri and I have enjoyed watching our children grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We never expected our girls to be good just because I was a pastor. We expected them to have a healthy fear of God. By His grace we never experienced the ugly years of rebellion and resentment. We taught our girls that rebellion was never against our opinions but against God's authority.

In the movie *Courageous*, Adam, one of the fathers, has a struggle with his son Dylan, a fifteen-year-old. Dylan feels his dad loves his younger sister more than him. Dylan needs to respect his dad, and Adam needs to learn to communicate with his son. It's a genuine picture that even in a Christian family, life is not perfect, and it takes work to build character and trust. I would never say there aren't issues and challenges, but these years don't have to be lethal and gut-wrenching for you and your parents. Allow your parents to be involved. Heed their advice. Seek their approval. Follow their example. But let that be just the starting point. Let that just be the foundation on which you build a courageous life.

I love to think of Daniel when I think of a young person who made a difference. He's a great example to follow. Nebuchadnezzar wanted some of the young Israelite men in his court. Rather than killing everyone, he asked his right-hand man to find some young men who had their act together. The king ordered him to look for the men who stood head and shoulders above their peers, young men with potential that he could put through a crash course in Chaldean culture (see Dan. 1:1–4).

Many scholars believe these young men were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. They were brought in to be brainwashed in the godless culture of Babylon. Everything they believed would be challenged, and they would face intense peer pressure. But note the words of Scripture regarding Daniel: "Daniel determined that he would not defile himself" (1:8). Daniel made a covenant in his heart that he would not cave in to the culture.

Among the thousands of young men brought into the land, two stand out: Ezekiel and Daniel. Both were godly young men. Daniel displayed the

one quality necessary for a person to soar spiritually: courage. He dared to stand up for what he believed. His courage wasn't just for a moment; it was a way of life.

I'm calling you now to rise up with the mind-set of Daniel, Amos, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist. We need a generation that fears God more than men. We need you.

Daniel was tested at the king's table in Babylon (Dan. 1:8ff). As a young man with great faith, his heart and mind were in tune with Jehovah. Although he was just a teenager when snatched out of his home, separated from his parents, and thrown into a strange environment, he stood for what he believed. Even when faced with enormous pressure and potentially deadly consequences, he never wavered. The early test defined him.

Daniel's resolve was the launching pad for all the decisions made throughout the rest of his life. He knew what he believed and why he believed. He learned to live according to God's Word. As someone once said about the Scriptures, "Know it in the head, stow it in the heart, show it in the life, sow it in the world."

Eating the king's meat and drinking from his wine cellar would have been a violation of Jewish law. Daniel knew to partake would have been viewed as a sign of compromise and even approval. Therefore Daniel purposed and resolved not to partake. Imagine passing up food fit for kings in order to honor the unseen God. Daniel was convinced and convicted that it was the right thing to do. He stood his ground, and his decision was vindicated (see Dan. 1:12–19). Even the king had to admit that Daniel was head and shoulders above all others.

It's never right to do wrong; it's always right to do right. Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean you should. Most individuals would have caved in and compromised. They would have argued to eat and live another day, saying, "What's the harm in a few ribs? Nobody back home will ever know. Our parents aren't here to check on us." That line of reasoning has led more than one prodigal into the pigpen of a distant land.

In *Courageous* we meet a young man searching for love and acceptance who turns to gang activity and violence in his quest for a sense of family and belonging. The gang leader tells him, "We're family now," after he is initiated into the group by means of a harsh beating. So many your age are looking for a place to fit in, a place to be accepted and loved. Unfortunately



most do not have the courage or the encouragement to stand against societal pressures and make wise decisions in the face of evil. They need you to pull them in, to show them the acceptance of the family of God, and to lead them toward the life God has in store for them.

Daniel lived a purposeful life. He didn't make rash decisions. His faith was not hit or miss. His appetite for the things of God gave him no appetite for worldly things. Daniel refrained from revelry, although the Babylonians were known for their physical excesses. Before Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to this age" (Rom. 12:2), Daniel lived it.

Yet Daniel maintained a gracious spirit. Being courageous doesn't mean you can be unkind. The fruit of the Spirit is not eliminated by boldness. Daniel simply lived what he believed with the perfect balance of boldness and gentleness.

Spiritual warfare is a battle of the mind. Daniel faced a trial of the mind when the king demanded that the wise men interpret his dream. If they failed, they would die. They tried to bargain for time with the king but got nowhere (see Dan. 2:10–11). Then the king ordered the wise men to be killed. When Daniel learned of the situation, he asked for an audience with the king and told Nebuchadnezzar he would interpret his dream. Then Daniel gathered his three friends for a prayer meeting.

Talk about courage. They were looking for Daniel to kill him, and he asked for an appointment with the king. It took courage to pass this test. Daniel was wise enough to call in his prayer partners. God gave Daniel a vision of what had happened in the dream. What he delivered to the king was not good news, but it was the truth. While the magicians lost their nerve, Daniel faced the situation head on. He didn't waver, even while delivering news of judgment and doom and the demise of the Babylonian Empire.

Daniel's honesty and truthfulness turned the heart of the king. "Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell down, paid homage to Daniel, and gave orders to present an offering and incense to him" (Dan. 2:46–48). If you want to be courageous, get alone with God and ask Him to make you bold. God will use you publicly if you allow Him to tutor you privately.

In the third trial we find Daniel in the lions' den. His faith led him there. Daniel served the Lord faithfully, but faithful service does not make one immune from tests. King Darius was on the verge of making Daniel the

prime minister of the nation. Out of jealousy and envy, his peers set a trap for him. They couldn't question Daniel's integrity or character, so they devised a plan of attack (see Dan. 6:4–10).

Daniel didn't compartmentalize his faith; it defined who he was at the core of his being. His faith didn't stem from convenience but conviction. While Daniel's enemies played on the king's ego, Daniel did what he had always done. He went home, threw open his windows, and prayed toward Jerusalem. He never forgot his roots, and he never compromised his character.

The person of courage is willing to face the consequences of his decisions. We may stand alone physically, but we are never alone spiritually. It never entered Daniel's mind to compromise. Not one time did he consider being politically correct. Although he was in the lions' den, the only person who lost sleep that night was the king. Daniel slept like a baby while the king tossed and turned wondering what happened to the man of God.

Daniel was a young man who became an old man and lived a consistent life. He remains one of the most powerful examples and influential leaders in all of human history. While living in a pagan culture, here was a young man who proved that you can stand for God.

One of the great regrets of my life is that I spent my high school years playing games and playing church instead of living for God. I wasted those years trying to please people who have never cared a thing about me. The truth is, most of the folks you strive to impress won't ever talk to you again after graduation. The reality is that I worried about what they thought of me, and they weren't even thinking of me! They were too absorbed in thinking about themselves.

This generation is living in a postmodern world. The day of the Judeo-Christian ethic is largely over in America. We are a chameleon culture, blending in so we don't stand out. In this environment we need Millennials who will have the courage to define the culture, not let the culture define them.

Some folks think if they are going to live for God, they have to be nerds or outcasts. They respond with a legalistic approach to life rather than with an understanding of balance and order. Daniel stood head and shoulders above his peers. But he wasn't weird; he was wise.

The courageous need godly wisdom.

Proverbs 1:7 reminds us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline.” If you want to be a game changer, you will have to learn to listen and be wise. John Calvin said, “This is our wisdom, to be learners to the end.”<sup>3</sup> Wisdom is not just acquiring information or filling in the blanks in a notebook. When people possess true wisdom, they don’t have to apologize for their actions. My mentor Vance Havner used to tell me, “If you lack knowledge, go to school. If you lack wisdom, get on your knees!”<sup>4</sup>

Studies show that in grades seven through twelve, the average person listens to eleven thousand hours of music, yet they are in school only seven thousand hours. If you were in church every time the doors opened, it wouldn’t even touch the hours of influence from the world. Jim Elliot, a missionary who was martyred in Ecuador, wrote out Psalm 119:37 in his diary: “Turn my eyes from looking at what is worthless; give me life in Your ways.” Following the entry he wrote of “the decentralizing effect (of television) on the mind and affections. It quickens me in ways not of God, defeating the purpose of prayer to be quickened in ways Divine.”

As a youth minister I shared two rules: (1) When in doubt, don’t. (2) Be where you are supposed to be, when you are supposed to be there, doing what you are supposed to be doing. Those two pretty much cover every life situation. Your choices determine your legacy.

Billy Graham said, “Courage is contagious. When a brave man takes a stand, the spines of others are often stiffened.”<sup>5</sup> Here’s my bottom line as a pastor and father: I want the next generation to take back the land we’ve squandered in my generation. We need a generation to rise up who will stand for Jesus no matter the cost. *The New Rebellion Handbook* defines *courage* as a “willingness to go the distance when the vision has faded, when you’re weary, when no one is there to cheer you on. Courage is an enduring commitment to be your true self when no one is looking and you’re facing intimidation. . . . Courage has many faces. Is yours one of them?”<sup>6</sup>

I pray that you will be the new face of courage in our land. In years past we’ve seen God do incredible things through young men and women who

were willing to be used by Him. I'm praying, "Lord, do it again."

There have been seasons in the past when God raised up a young generation to become spiritual giants. My friend Warren Wiersbe tells the story of one such movement, Youth for Christ.

Youth for Christ was a ministry of faith, bathed in prayer, that resulted in sacrifice and service. The compelling vision was to reach lost teens and get them into churches where they could grow. Like Abraham, we went out not sure where we were going, but the Lord directed us. Bob Cook used to remind us, "If you can explain what is going on, God didn't do it."

The official motto was, "Geared to the times, anchored to the Rock," and this meant we felt free to use any legitimate means to spread the gospel: music, books, quizzes, skits, singspirations, rallies, holiday conferences, etc. It was remarkable the way pastors, missionaries, businessmen, senior adults, and teens rallied together, prayed together, and worked together. Local YFC ministries sprang up seemingly spontaneously in the United States and Great Britain and then almost worldwide. *YFC Magazine* began early in the movement, now known as *Campus Life*.

Apart from the Lord's blessing, why did it succeed so amazingly? Partly because after World War II, teenagers finally became a recognized part of society. They were spending lots of money and creating lots of problems. Before YFC, very few local churches had youth pastors; today almost every church has a youth ministry. YFC also sent many teens to Christian colleges, and many new schools sprouted up.

There was a wonderful unity among the workers. I don't recall any denominational squabbles. Our statement of faith was evangelical, so we were united in Christ and the gospel. Had we focused on denominational distinctive, we would have grieved the Lord and probably wrecked the ministry. Ted Engstrom used to say, "YFC is grounded in the Word, founded on the Word, and bounded by the Word."

The Christian teens themselves were at the heart of the harvest. They prayed, took their Bibles to school, witnessed, invited their

friends to the YFC clubs and rallies, and maintained a good reputation at school and church. Many of them are today ministering as pastors, teachers, missionaries, and faithful Christians in many areas of life.

We were severely criticized by some famous Christian leaders, but the Lord took care of that. Our policy was to love them all, pray for them, and avoid public debates that could only multiply the problems. Time has vindicated YFC. I wish I had a list of the “famous” people (so called) who came to Christ through YFC. Ravi Zacharias comes to mind. Billy Graham was a vice president of YFC for many years and used his influence to strengthen and expand it.

It happened then, and I know it can happen now.

It begins with courage.

It starts with you.

# My Resolution

**B**elow is the resolution from the film *Courageous*. Take some time to rewrite that resolution—alone or with a group of friends—and make the resolution your very own.

When you're ready, sign it and date it. Embellish it. Frame it. Make a copy to hang where you can see it. Share it with someone who will walk the journey with you.

We need you. Be courageous.

I do solemnly resolve before God to take full responsibility for myself, my wife, and my children. I will love them, protect them, and serve them and teach them the statutes of God as the spiritual leader of my home. I will be faithful to my wife, to love and honor her and be willing to lay down my life for her, as Christ did for me. I will teach my children to love God with all their hearts, minds, and strength and will train them to honor authority and live responsibly. I will confront evil, pursue justice, and love mercy and will treat others with kindness, respect, and compassion. I will work diligently to provide for the needs of my family and will speak truthfully and keep my promises. I will forgive those who have wronged me and reconcile with those I have wronged. I will walk in integrity as a man answerable to God and will seek to honor God, obey His Word, and do His will. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

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# Notes

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## Conclusion

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