

COURAGE FOR THE DAYS AHEAD

"Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." Joshua 1:9.

These words were spoken to a young and comparatively untried man who had just stepped into the place of a veteran leader, and who was to conduct the army of Israel through a hazardous campaign. They were to march against a foe whom rumor had invested with superhuman prowess and perfect military equipment. The men who were going on this mission had proved themselves untrustworthy, fickle, and cowardly. They had run away from more than one critical fight, and shown themselves soft as clay in trials where hardness was especially required. Their leader needed a lot of courage to undertake such a venture. He also needed great confidence in himself and a sublime faith in God to make him equal to his task. Here we read the charge that was given to him from heaven, and which inspired him at the beginning of his labors. It was an exhortation to be resolute and fearless, to be of a strong and courageous spirit, and to go forward with the certainty that the power which had sent him forth would guarantee him victory.

Courage was the first virtue to be exemplified, noticed, and extolled by human beings. The primitive arena of courage was the battlefield, and the earliest heroes of all nations were warriors. People advanced greatly when they came to recognize that civil life offers as many opportunities for courage as military life does. The doctor, fighting an epidemic and exposing himself thereby, and perhaps his children, to death, is as brave as a soldier on the battlefield. The fireman who saves life at the risk of losing his own life from burning timbers and falling walls deserves an equal place with the soldier.

No arena presents more scope for the possibility of courage than religion. For Joshua to go over Jordan meant the exercise of great courage, the basis of which was the Lord's command and promise. In the Old Testament recur no less than thirteen times such commands as, "Be strong and courageous," "Be courageous and be valiant," "Be of good courage," and "Be strong and of a good courage."

If you want to see a hero where will you find a better one than David approaching the giant, not in an armor of steel, but in the strength of the God of Jacob; or Elijah, standing alone on Mount Carmel against Ahab, and against all Israel. The New Testament contains the record of how Stephen exhibited remarkable courage. In every century since there have been those who have exhibited tremendous courage. Perhaps there is no scene of modern history that surpasses that in which Martin Luther stood confronting the powers of church and state, and in the face of imminent death declared, "Here stand I: I cannot do otherwise; so help me God!" When John Knox was laid in the ground there was a true eulogy that was passed over his dead body: "There lies one who never feared the face of man."

These are days when courage is demanded of many people in a degree never before experienced. There is a spirit of hidden courage in the everyday life around us. Frequently we hear of a mother who, though unable to swim, plunges into deep water and with the help of God rescues her child from drowning. A splendid act of heroism in the presence of great danger, as when firemen rescue women and children from a burning building, or a coastguard goes out in the face of a tempest to the relief of a ship in peril, thrills us with admiration.

Far more difficult to summon is the kind of courage that calls for a long hard pull against overwhelming odds. It was that kind of courage which enabled Helen Keller, who was from her infancy deaf, dumb, and blind, to become one of the most useful and illustrious women in America. Then, there is the courage of those who resist the temptation to resign themselves to self pity in the face of fatal illness, but who smile and are even happy on the last mile through the valley of the shadow. To have known them is a never-to-be-forgotten inspiration.

One of my cherished memories is that of standing in Whitehall, London, and looking at the Houses of Parliament, and listening at the beautiful chimes of one of the most famous clocks in the world, known as Big Ben, which was named for Benjamin Hall, the commissioner of works when it was hung. The enormous sledge hammer which strikes the bell wakes into reverberation thirteen and one-half tons of metal and with crashing, yet melodious and deep-throated sound, the hour rings out over the city. Few people are aware that these chimes sound two lines from an old hymn: "So hour by hour be Thou my guide, kept by Thy power no step will slide." So it is that the government buildings of a great nation founded on the Christian faith tell the people hour by hour that a person must have courage, and that courage is derived from the knowledge that God is with you.

A rugged frontiersman of the Old West made his will without the assistance of an attorney. It was only three sentences long. The man misspelled several words. His crude writing was done on a rough piece of paper. But the thinking that went into the will was sound. Here it is:

"This here is my last will and testament. I ain't got no money to leave you, nothin' exceptin' our old cabin, Old Buck (presumably a horse) and my two guns. But I do leave you somethin' worth a parcel more than money: 1. A man's word that is as good as his bond. 2. Faith in the Lord Jesus. 3. Courage, so you won't be afraid of nothin' or nobody."

Thus speaks the great American spirit that made this nation what it is. The man did not have any money to hand down. But what is money compared with integrity and honesty? Or compared with faith? Or compared with courage?

Think courageously. We become what we think. There is a law of attraction in this world whereby like responds to like. If you send out thoughts of fear, what are you going to get back? Fear. If you constantly send out thoughts of courage, then courage will flow to you. Courage, like money in the bank, is something you lay up. You just don't pluck courage out of the air. You develop or grow courage.

Act courageously. We usually get according as we act. And we have built into us a capacity for acting with courage. One remembers what Sir Winston Churchill said: "Live dangerously. Take things as they come. Dread naught and all will be well."

Pray for courage, just as you pray for your daily bread. God will give it to you.

The secret of a fearless life and the strength of a godly life are found in this, that we have received a direct call and charge from God to take our place in life's battle, to do our part in the world's work, and to conduct ourselves in a way that will please and honor the Lord. We are not here

by accident, or by our own appointment. We hold a commission from the Lord. He has a purpose for each life, a plan of action for each life, a niche of service which each life may fill, and a noble end which each life may attain. "Be not afraid: neither be thou dismayed."

Christian courage glorifies God. Christians ought to be courageous, so that the enemies of God would not have any occasion to sneer and blaspheme. Weakness and cowardice in the Christian always hurt the cause of Christ, while courage glorifies God. Even the unsaved expects the Christian to exhibit courage in the trying hours. When we fail to measure up, great damage is done. Peter did not help the cause of Christ when he turned coward in the courtyard and denied that he knew Christ. His denial and swearing caused the enemies of Christ to sneer.

God was glorified when Gideon and three hundred men put to flight the Midianites. God was glorified when Daniel courageously prayed three times a day even when it meant he would be thrown into the lions' den. God was glorified by the courage of Paul who made even the rulers of the Roman Empire to tremble. Your courage in hours of stress will glorify God. "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be dismayed."

Christian courage has illuminated the pages of history. The greatest stories ever recorded are those of Christian courage; courage to stand true to Christ even in the face of danger or death. If you need something to give you backbone, read of the persecution, suffering, and death of those who have followed Christ. The parade of Christian martyrs began with Stephen, who was stoned to death by enraged Jews. Two thousand Christians died in the persecution that followed the death of Stephen. When you think of courage, think of the Apostle Paul chained in the Mamertine prison in Rome, awaiting the executioner's axe; a prison where the light of day did not enter, where no breath of fresh air could enter, and where his bed was on the rock floor. From that prison Paul wrote letters of inspiration to cheer and instruct Christians until the end of this age. Talk about courage, Paul had it.

Real courage always comes from true faith in Christ. We need courage to stand true, courage to face life's disappointments and sorrows, courage to face death. God knows this day calls for courage. We have difficult and trying days ahead, even upon us now. The men, women, and children without faith in Christ will be miserable.

It takes courage to live as one should, and it takes courage to die. But if we live, let us live unto the Lord, and if we die, let us die unto the Lord, for in Him is courage, and strength, and victory.