

## THE NEED FOR COURAGE

ACTS 4:13-22

29 July 2018

My desire is that God would use these few words this morning to inspire us to greater courage in the cause of Christ. My prayer is that he will grant us to overcome all fear of speaking the truth of the Gospel message. When God puts a word on our lips that we will always have the boldness to speak it openly and clearly when it is unpopular or even dangerous.

Paul had this same prayer for his younger apprentice, Timothy. Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:3, "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching; but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own liking and will turn away from listening to the truth." In Harry's unofficial translation of the Bible, 'Timmy my boy, it's like this, you are going to have to say some unpopular things that won't exactly scratch where people itch. I am warning you now, don't be shocked when the truth you teach is ridiculed & hated. It will take all of your courage to press on, Tim. So be courageous and take your share of hard knocks for the truth that we are all called to share.' (1:8; 2:3; 3:13-14). End quote. We live in such a day. It takes great courage to be a true Christian today. When I was a young man I never would have thought that in the USA there would be such an unabashed attempt to marginalize Christianity and Christians; to silence the message of the Cross and sound Biblical teaching as we are seeing today.

Subjectivism and relativism permeate our culture and threaten to destroy churches, schools, and even denominations. By RELATIVISM I mean the assumption that there is no such thing as absolute truth. What is true or right or good or beautiful for you may not be for me. Everything is relative. By SUBJECTIVISM I mean the assumption that I have the right to determine for myself what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, beautiful and ugly. That there is no objective reality and no objective authority. In other words, no God. That is the atmosphere we live in today. It breaks my heart and I know it breaks God's heart.

In such a culture it is extremely unpopular to take a strong stand on anything. The claim that you know a truth that everybody should believe or that you know a behavior that everyone should avoid is enough to earn for you the name, arrogant, intolerant, Facist, hateful, or even dangerous.

But if you avoid talking about truth, or give the impression that truth is unknowable, and avoid anything that smacks of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ you are considered 'enlightened', 'humble'; 'kindhearted'; 'loving'. Truth becomes a lie and the lie becomes truth.

It's not easy to be called arrogant and dangerous; but it feels good to be liked and admired. Therefore, the temptation to lose our theological and moral nerve is tremendous and the need for courage is immense. Too often when we are confronted with this culture we want to cast aside our commitment to our Lord and turn tail.

There's an old joke about the Lone Ranger and his faithful Tonto. It seems that the two of them had finally found themselves in a battle they just couldn't win. A thousand screaming Apaches had them trapped in a box canyon. Arrows whooshed through the air, war cries filled the sky, and it was just a matter of time before they were overwhelmed. With a grim set to his face, the Lone Ranger turned to

Tonto and said, "Well, Tonto, we've had a lot of good years together, but it looks like this is it. We've finally met our match. There's no way out, no escape. It's just you and me, friend. We might as well face the enemy, fight, and if we die, we die standing tall." Tonto looks at him and says, "What you mean WE white man?" as he got up and walked toward the enemy camp.

Unfortunately, that is what we often do in the face of opposition to our Lord, walk over to the opposing camp and cower in silence. Now I am not saying these people today are our enemies. They are not the enemy. WE know who the enemy is, Satan, with all of his twisted ideology. People are being deceived today and desperately need all of us to stand with the truth of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That takes real courage.

What is courage? When you ask people that question most will give an illustration: A Policeman running into a burning building to save a child. A soldier braving enemy fire to save a fallen comrade. A little boy facing a giant with nothing but a shepherd's toy. Webster defines courage as, "mental or moral strength to persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty".

If you ask people, what is the opposite of courage, many will answer 'fear'. But it's not fear. The opposite of courage is cowardice. Fear is only a catalyst that pushes us to act one way or the other. Cowardice is giving fear the power to control us. Empowering fear. Courage is disarming fear and, in spite of all opposition, doing and speaking what is right; what God expects of us. To go and spread the Gospel throughout our world. Our world is right outside those doors.

In today's Scripture passage we see John & Peter, after spending the night in jail, standing tall before the Jewish Council and culture of their day. As you may recall, Peter had healed a man born disabled and preached a wonderful sermon where 5000 men accepted Christ as savior. Now he and John were called to task by the Jewish elite of their day. The Sanhedrin was made up of the priests (mostly Sadducees), scribes and prominent Pharisees, possibly as many as 70 leading Jewish men of that day in Jerusalem. It is even possible that Saul, we know him today as Paul, was among these men. This is the very group who condemned Jesus to the cross. Put yourself in their shoes. Would you have been just a little intimidated; knowing that these men who called for Jesus' murder have the power to do the same to you? And right now, they are not very happy. What do we see from these two former fishermen? Do we see them cowering before these powerful men? Stammering lips and wobbly legs? We do not. We see boldness born from a courage that is not of this world. It made no sense to the Sanhedrin. They recognized that these men were uneducated. Then they recognized something else, that they had been with Jesus! They were no longer surprised by their courage. They were followers of Jesus and in ways they could not even understand. But they had witnessed Jesus' behavior. Neither had Jesus cowered before these men. He hadn't even cowered before the most powerful representative in Jerusalem for the entire Roman empire, Pilate. Jesus, who had not cowered before a Roman cross. They saw the same steely courage in Peter and John.

Springing from our passage today let's talk a little about Christian courage from the Word of God.

- I. First, courage is a command.
  - A. Although uneducated and unlearned I have no doubt they knew many of the scriptures about courage. Josh. 1:9, "Be strong and courageous. Do not tremble or be dismayed..." 1 Chron. 28:20; Psalm 27, 56; Isa 41:10; 54:4; Mat. 10:26, 28; and many others where our Lord commands us to be courageous and unafraid. As they stood

before the most powerful Jewish men in their culture, Peter and John knew that Jesus expected them to stand tall for truth, the Gospel and for Him. Jesus stood tall before this very same group of men and Peter and John knew they must do no less.

Throughout history our brothers and sisters in the Lord stood tall no matter the cost.

In ancient Rome, crowds by the tens of thousands would gather in the Coliseum to watch as Christians were torn apart by wild animals. Paul Rader, commenting on his visit to this famous landmark said, "I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked myself, 'Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?'" Rader continued, "I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in my heart, as He worked in Paul's heart when He brought him on his handcuffed way to Rome." From Our Daily Bread: "Those early Christians 'lived on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no possessions to hold them back.' They were strong and courageous as God commanded.

- B. We need to also consider the words God gave to Ezekiel in Ch. 33: 7-9 7"As for you, son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, give them a warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'Wicked one, you will surely die,' but you do not speak out to warn him about his way, that wicked person will die for his sin, yet I will hold you responsible for his blood. But if you warn a wicked person to turn from his way and he doesn't turn from it, he will die for his sin, but you will have rescued yourself." These are sobering words for us. God gave us a message and an experience that saved our souls. He expects us to share it with those who need to hear. If we do not he will hold us accountable. If God brings someone to whom He is speaking and touches our heart to speak and we do not He will count that as sin; sin for which we will need to repent. This is serious folks. God expects us to go to the people he puts on our hearts and share the truth of God's word with them.
- C. One more scripture that is important for us to consider is found in Revelation, 21:8 This is Jesus speaking here. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." Did you listen to what the cowardly are compared? With the abominable, murderers, the immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, liars. Not good company. I dare say, most people would not consider cowardice a mortal sin. But there it is in black and white. Do you think maybe Jesus spoke about this with his disciples? Peter and John seem to so behave. Jesus is calling cowardice sin. We see we are commanded to be courageous with our faith. We come to my second point.

## II. Secondly, Christian Courage has a Companion.

- A. Who is this companion? Jesus himself. Note again that last part of v13 in our text, they recognize them as having been with Jesus. They had it half correct. They had been with Jesus for over 3 years. But the part they missed was the most important, Jesus was with them. These two men were standing IN Jesus. 2 Cor. 5:17 tells us, "If any man be in

Christ he is a new creature.” Rev. 2:20, Jesus also says, “I stand at the door and knock, if anyone opens the door I will come in to him and dine with him.” This is one of the mysteries of redemption, or salvation; Christ takes up residence IN us; we are also clothed in Christ as his blood covers us and cleanses us from our sins. He covers us with Himself. Christ dwells within us and we dwell in Christ. You can’t get any more secure than that. Therefore, when we stand before the world we stand in and through Christ. When we stand before those who are seeking truth we share Christ with them. When we stand before opposition, even violent opposition, we stand strong in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in His love. We are called to do no less. He is with us.

- B. Cowards stand alone. When we let fear overpower us we are saying Jesus is not enough; we stop trusting Him. What we are doing is throwing off our Lord Jesus like a coat on a hot day. When Satan sees us cowering in fear he sees only us and we are no match alone against his power. In Indiana we’d say, we are easy pickins’. When you feel like throwing off our Lord, stop for a moment, ask yourself these questions. If the disciples would have acted the way I am, what would have happened? If Jesus had been afraid and run from the garden in fear, where would I be today? If the person who shared Jesus with me had been afraid, where would I be today? The disciples didn’t cower in fear and neither did Jesus, nor the person who shared truth with you. Jesus is our example. Jesus is our companion.

### III. Third, Christian Courage conquers.

- A. Polycarp, just before his execution, said "Eighty and six years I have served Christ and He has done me nothing but good; how then could I curse Him, my Lord and Savior?" With that, he was burned alive. Polycarp’s name became famous throughout the empire among Christian’s and non-Christians, spreading the Gospel even faster.
- B. Courage like that built the Church of Jesus Christ. Our brave brothers and sisters who were fed to lions or laid they necks down for the executioners may not look like conquerors but they were. Their martyred blood became granite stones upon which the church of Jesus Christ was built and brought down the gates of hell. History proves this out over and over. Christians empowered by our Lord conquered Satan’s strongholds with their own blood. Pagan Rome fell before the courage of such men and women who spread the Gospel while under the sentence of death. Pagan South America, Africa, Europe fell before the courage of the men and women of God who followed the example of our Lord and laid down their lives for the Gospel. We stand upon the sacrifices of first our Lord Jesus and second the men and women who cared not for their own lives unto death.
- C. Christian courage confound our opposition. The Sanhedrin in our passage didn’t know what to do with Peter and John. Pagan leaders throughout history didn’t know what to do with our faithful brothers and sisters. Intimidate them? They were undaunted. Persecute them? They remained faithful to our Lord. Beat them? They rejoiced. Imprison them? They sang hymns and worshiped God. Murder them? The Church grew even faster and stronger. In the words of Hebrews 11:38, ‘People of whom the world was not worthy’. The blood of martyrs mingled with the blood of Jesus becomes a mountain that crushes everything that opposes God as we read in Daniel 2:34.

Christian courage conquers all opposition. “Be of good cheer; we have not resisted unto death.” (Heb. 12:4) When we stand true to our Lord the world doesn’t know what to do with us.

#### IV. Finally, Courage comes from intimate communion with the Master.

Peter and John stood strong against intimidation and threats. Christian courage is rather uncommon today. Unfortunately, many give in to fear and intimidation and go silent before the opposition. Worse, many don’t even try to stand, willing to just sit. Do nothing. We need to look at the example of these two ordinary men, Peter and John. Or any of the other disciples, all ordinary men and women. What made them extraordinary for the Kingdom of God?

- A. They spent 3 ½ yrs of intimate and personal time with Jesus. They were inundated in the living Word of God. Many today have never really, ‘Been with Jesus’. Oh, many may have a ‘head’ knowledge of Jesus. They may know about Jesus, but they don’t ‘know’ Jesus; rarely spending personal time with him. Peter and John had a loving and intimate relationship with Jesus. Do you want courage like these two men? You will only find it when you do the same.
  - a. Just recently two of our grandsons were awarded brown belts in karate. They had to perform all of the proper moves and routines to earn those belts. It took them hours and hours of patient practice and instruction from a determined master trainer. A soldier, in order to stand firm against a powerful enemy, endures weeks and weeks of training under difficult and sometimes harsh master trainers. As Christians, if we want to stand firm against a powerful enemy we must also learn from our Master Teacher, Jesus. We must be inundated with His teachings and example; love and adore Him. What else made them extraordinary for the Kingdom?
- B. They were filled with His power. Peter and John were filled with power from on high. On the day of Pentecost they waited for the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus commanded them. Holy Spirit transformed these men, and all of the disciples, from cowards into towers of courage, strength and confidence. We must follow their example and be filled with Holy Spirit from on high. That same power is available to us today and we too are commanded, in Eph. 5:18, to be filled with the Spirit. When you pray ask God to fill you with His Spirit. He will. When the Jewish leaders looked at these two men they were not seeing mere men, they were seeing the power of Holy Spirit. You can have that same power today and stand courageously for our Lord; speaking his truth to a lost world. God loves them and he is calling us to be fearless witnesses.

#### Conclusion

Peter and John were filled with the Spirit of God and courage. They were not afraid of these men. As a matter-of-fact, if you look again at our passage, who were afraid? The Jewish leaders!! V21, “And when they had threatened them further, they let them go on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened.” They had to let them go because of the people who recognized that God had done something powerful through these two men. The opposition were ‘afraid’ to punish Peter and John because of the crowd. We move under the God who is our banner with

courage and confident trust. We all have been commanded to be courageous. We can do so because we are not alone, our Lord and Savior goes before us and Holy Spirit dwells within us. We walk out of this building conquerors over our fallen culture through Jesus Christ. Not because we are armed with guns and bullets and hate, but because we have come to know Christ in His love for us and his world.

Our culture is in a tailspin and where it will end I do not know. I am concerned. I am also convinced that Christ challenges us to stand with him against the mainstream of culture as He did and speak the truth of His Gospel message with boldness and courage. Our country and our world need it desperately. Amen.