

Courage For The Days Ahead



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COURAGE FOR THE DAYS AHEAD

Scripture: Joshua 1:9; I Chronicles 19:13

On a bitter, cold night last February I was walking in Whitehall, London, near Westminster Abbey. Nightfall in London, I have discovered, often has a penetrating chill to it, for the climate is damp and the cold gets to you. That evening the Londoners themselves were all muffled up as they rushed toward the ground and stood in long queues patiently waiting for buses. It was a typical scene of a vast city getting ready for the night. Towering into the darkness of coming night were the Houses of Parliament, and from atop them there now suddenly sounded the chimes of one of the most famous clocks in the world, known as Big Ben - so named, I understand, because the commissioner of works when it was begun - was a man named Benjamin Hall. The enormous sled-like hammer which strikes the bell woke into reverberation thirteen and one half tons of metal and with crashing, yet melodious and deep-throated sound, the hour of six rang 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, even quarter hour by quarter hour, that a person must have courage and that courage is derived from the knowledge that God is with you.

A friend of mine told me of seeing the last will and testament of a rugged frontiersman of the Old West.

This will had onviously been made without benefit of any lawyer. It is only three sentences. The man misspelled many words. His writing is terrible. It is written on a rough piece of paper. But the thinking that went into it was sound thinking. 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 and Buck (presumably a horse) my two guns. But I leave you somethin' worth a parcel more than money. I. 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, if I may say so, the great American spirit that made this nation. The man had no money to hand down. But what is money compared with integrity and honesty? Or compared with faith? Or compared with courage? Well, I never met that old frontiersman I have met men of great culture who gave the same advice.

When I was about twenty-two years of age and had preached only three or four sermons, I was invited (I did not know how) to preach one Sunday at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. That was quite an experience. To begin with, chapel at Wesleyan was compulsory which wasn't good. I mean, it doesn't make the preacher more popular for his hearers to be compelled to be there. Moreover, at Wesleyan they allowed applause - not clapping, but snapping of the fingers. If they liked your sermon the boys snapped their fingers. If they didn't, they rubbed their feet. I won't tell you which they did for me. But to stand before a thousand boys when you are only twenty-two years old yourself and try to preach them a sermon - I'll never forget it!

And afterwards a grizzled old professor took me to his house for midday dinner. He was a lovable character. And we sat by the fire that winter afternoon and talked. When I made ready to go he said, "Son, before you go I want to give you something. I've given it to a good many young men. The fact is, I keep a supply on hand." What he gave me was a little book by J. M. Barrie, his immortal essay on courage. And I kept it for many years. Finally I loaned it to another young man and never did see it again. I hope it still makes the rounds. But when he handed the book the professor said,

"There are many things you can live without. You can live without money, you can live without health, you can live without education. But one thing you can live without is courage. So read this essay. It will help you build courage for the days ahead."

Now of course the wisest book ever written, the Bible, has a great deal to say about courage. There is that passage in Joshua chapter 1, verse 9, which is the classic text on courage: "Be strong and of a good courage; (what I did in these words) not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." No matter what, no matter how many difficulties, what dark clouds, what trouble, God is always with you. Hang on to that thought.

Then there is a passage in Chronicles which tells about King Joab, king of Israel, when he was about to do battle with the Syrians and the Ammonites. The king's brother was with him as a kind of a subordinate officer. And when they had hastily deployed their forces against the advancing armies of the Ammonites and Syrians, a formidable host, Joab said to his brother, "Be of good courage, and let us have ourselves valiantly for our

people . . . and let the Lord do that which is good in his sight."

Now there is a speech for you that is worth its weight in gold! "Let us behave ourselves valiantly." Do you behave yourself valiantly? Or are you like those of our soft, effete generation who whine and whimper and crawl through life on their hands and knees, piteously petitioning somebody to make things easy for them? That isn't the way this country came into being, and that isn't the way it will go on in greatness either. "Let us behave ourselves valiantly." You have to have something on the ball to do that. You have to be a real man or a real woman and not a willy-nilly. But Christians are supposed to be that way. We are supposed to behave ourselves valiantly and let the Lord do that which is good in His sight. Be valiantly and He will take care of the rest of it.

"Well," you say, "this all sounds very well, but can I have courage? I don't feel very courageous. In fact, I feel weak and I am full of fear. *How* can I have courage?"

All right. The answer is: think courage, act with courage, pray for courage. Let us discuss these three points one by one.

First: Start thinking courage. 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 weakness, what are you going to get back? Weakness. If you constantly send out thoughts of defeat, what will you get back? Defeat. But, on the contrary, if you think thoughts of courage, then courage will flow to you. The more courageous your thinking, the greater the results will be.

The other day I was in Charlottesville, Virginia and stood in front of the Monticello Hotel looking at that enormous statue of Stonewall Jackson. Now Jackson is one of the greatest military men this nation ever produced. Robert E. Lee called him "my strong right arm." When Jackson was killed, Lee wept. Well, one time when Jackson was planning an attack in the Valley of the Shenandoah that would require ingenuity, skill and great daring, a subordinate general whom the difficulties inherent in the operation came to him and said, "General, I'm afraid of this. I fear this is dangerous." Or words to that effect.

Jackson put his hand on the shoulder of his general and said, "General, never take counsel of your fears." If you take counsel of your fears, listen to your fears, sit at the feet of your fears, you will act according to your fears. So take counsel of courage.

Courage, like money in the bank, is something you lay up. You just don't pluck courage out of the air. You develop courage, you grow it. The flowers we enjoy had to grow from bulbs or seeds. They didn't just spring out of the ground full formed. It is the same with courage. You have to grow it, develop it, nurture it, step it up. But if by thinking courage and taking counsel of courage you do grow your courage from a seedling, then when crises come, as they will to every human being, you will instinctively act with courage. And by acting with courage in a crisis you may save your whole life and your whole future.

Recently I was reading *Reader's Digest* which I think is one of the finest periodicals published in this country because it stands for the moral best and for idealism - and I read a rather somber article about

mysterious air crashes. It seems that the effects of mind that, as the old frontiersman didn't you
bulence at high altitudes, or even at low altitudes for being afraid of nothin' or nobody." This isn't the easy;
matter are not too well understood. And this poses is hard. But it is the first rule for having courage: think
tricky problems. The article described among other things the second rule is to act courageously. When
the case of a big jet that was passing over Nebraska the second rule is to act courageously. When
day back in 1963 when the pilot saw ahead an enormous cloud, I think many people remembered that
line of sinister-looking black thunderclouds. He got together among many things in this man which had
mission to climb to thirty-eight thousand feet to get above the world: his philosophy of living dangerously.
those clouds. But up there he ran into the worst. Churchill said, "Live dangerously. Take things as they
lence, he said, that he ever experienced in all his life. "Dread naught and all will be well." We usually get
career. There was a series of profound joys. Then it according as we act. And we all have built into us a
was as if an enormous column of air seized the plane and thrust the nose upward, and then it went into a If I were younger I think I would go into mountain
thrust the nose upward, and then it went into a If I were younger I think I would go into mountain
slanting dive. The further it fell the faster it fell. I think I admire the men who climb mountains. I was
rush of air against the plane became so strong. I recently read about Edward Whymper, who on July
froze the controls, that nothing could be done with 1865 became the first man to complete a successful
them. climb of the Matterhorn. Prior to that time people living

Now the pilot had a choice. Either he could just hope in its vicinity used to say this mountain was inhabited
the plane would somehow come out of it or he could take by evil spirits who would throw rocks down at people.
a daring action which might right the plane or might lose those were landslides, but the superstitious local people
integrate it. He had no time to think about it. He had thought the rocks were thrown by evil spirits. And very
react intuitively. And he gave the plane more power. few mountaineers had attempted to ascend the Matter
This was extremely dangerous because the speed of fall it presented formidable difficulties.
ing had already passed the limit of speed which the Edward Whymper was a young English artist who had
framework of the plane was designed to withstand. been commissioned by a London publisher to sketch Al
safety. But as he had hoped, the controls unfroze and the plane leveled out at twelve thousand feet, leaving developed an almost obsessive ambition to scale the Mat
plane leveled out at twelve thousand feet, leaving developed an almost obsessive ambition to scale the Mat
nine passengers limp from the terrifying experience they had been through, but thanking God that the man who
sat in that cockpit was one who could think courage. the top
a chsls.

So if you want courage for the days ahead, think and three Swiss guides - a party of seven in all. They
courage until you become a courage thinker. Made up

taking view; they put up an improvised flag; they were too gay; they were happy. They had conquered the Matterhorn. But they reckoned without the descent.

On the way down one of the Englishmen slipped and fell against a Swiss guide so that the guide also lost his foothold, and these two plunging downward dragged with them two other of the Englishmen - to whom they were attached by rope - and the four of them went tumbling from precipice to precipice four thousand feet to their deaths. This left Whymper and the two other guides, one Peter Taugwalde and his son, also called Peter. The Taugwalders froze with terror. And here is Whymper's description of what followed:

"The young man did nothing but scream and sob, 'We are lost! we are lost!' Fixed between the rock and the snow, neither move up nor down. I begged young Peter to descend but he dared not. Unless he did, we could not advance. Old Peter became alive to the danger, and swelled the cry, 'We are lost! we are lost!' The father's fear was natural - he trembled for his son; the young man's fear was cowardly - he thought of self alone. The last old Peter summoned up courage, changed his position to a rock to which he could fix the rope; the young man then descended, and we all stood together. For more than two hours afterwards I thought almost every moment, that the next would be my last; Taugwalders utterly unnerved, were not only incapable of giving assistance, but were in such a state that a slip might have been expected from them at any moment. Several times old Peter turned with ashy face and faltering limbs and said, with terrible emphasis, 'I cannot!'"

"About six p.m. we arrived at the snow upon the ridge descending towards Zermatt, and all peril was over."

What an experience! Although Edward Whymper was too modest to put it so, this was undoubtedly a case of one man's courage saving three. The other two went to pieces, but Whymper, facing possible imminent death moment by moment for two hours, held steady. In his feelings, he could still act with courage. He seems to have known this so well that no question about it even entered his mind. Act as though you have courage and you will have it.

Herbert Spencer, the English philosopher, another man who demonstrated this. He didn't climb a mountain of stone, but he climbed a mountain of faith in his study. For my knowledge of this achievement I am again indebted to *Reader's Digest* though I don't want you to get the idea that is where I obtain all my information! Herbert Spencer at age forty had a nervous breakdown and had such terrible pains in his head that he had to take opium to sleep nights. Yet in the midst of these terrible headaches he began a ten-volume *Synthetic Philosophy*. Finally he got so he could only dictate for ten minutes at a time five times a day. That is fifty minutes a day in all. But in that manner he finished his work.

For every one of us at one time or another the going is going to get very tough. But you have it in you the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to do what you are supposed to do. So first is to think courage. Second is to act with courage. And third is to pray for courage. I believe a person should pray for courage as he prays for his daily bread. God will give it to you, because He will give you Himself. Let me illustrate.

Quite recently at a prayer breakfast in Washington attended by the President and Vice President, Supreme

Court Justices, members of Congress and others, General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, related an instance from his life:

Fourteen years ago, during the Korean War, General Johnson found himself one night in charge of a handful of American fighters holding a dreary stretch of deserted road to cover a retreat. Just "a lonely commander" he was, as he describes it, fearful for the safety of the men he was leading and wondering if he could carry out his assignment and still give them a chance to survive.

"I was very troubled," he said, "so I just shut my eyes and talked to God, right there on that cold, frozen road. I asked His help. And out of the still of the night, as if from a great distance came God's voice saying, 'Be strong, have no fear, I am with you.' " From that moment he had no fear, only a deep sense of peace. And he and his men had the courage they needed to fight their way out of that situation.

So: "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." Let us therefore behave ourselves valiantly.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the great gift of courage which comes to us out of our own minds as we think it; of courage which comes to us out of acting courageously, courage reproducing courage; and of that courage which we receive from Thee, the Author of courage, through our prayers. Help us to be have ourselves valiantly. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.