

## “The Courage of Jesus”

How would you describe Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ? Many would point out that He was **compassionate**: He healed sick people, and welcomed non-religious people scorned by the religious leaders of the day. Or they might say that He was **wise**: He had an uncanny wisdom that came straight from God. Or that He had tremendous **above-human power**: He calmed the stormy sea and miraculously fed a hungry crowd of thousands with 5 little loaves and 2 fish.

But a characteristic of Jesus often overlooked is His **courage** – His **sheer courage**. I’m afraid that in the minds of many He is often pictured as a soft and silky figure, gentle and mild, when in fact, the Jesus of the New Testament had a raw courage that outdistances most of us.

Let’s look at two Scriptures. The first is Luke, chapter 9, verse 51: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem”. Luke describes how at one point in His ministry, Jesus shifted focus. He set His gaze toward Jerusalem, for the final chapter in His life. There He would come into open conflict with religious leaders, and eventually be executed by them.

Luke says Jesus “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. I can’t help but think that the gospel writer Luke had this verse from Isaiah in mind: “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (Isaiah 50:7). It’s like Jesus is stone-faced, zeroed in on Jerusalem, even though to go there is like walking into a deadly trap, because the religious leaders want Him out of the way. I like *The Message* paraphrase of Luke 9:51 “When it came close to the time for His Ascension, He *gathered up his courage and steeled himself* for the journey to Jerusalem.” Note: “he gathered up his courage”.

The other passage we will look at is in John, chapter 7, verses 14, 25 and 26). “About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach...now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, ‘Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him. Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?’” Notice: “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill?” The Jewish authorities wanted to kill Jesus. Jesus knew that. Yet He goes into Jerusalem where these leaders were headquartered – walking right into a hornet’s nest! *Jesus had a raw courage that can serve as a model for us!*

If you look at a definition of “courage” it says: the ability to face danger, difficulty, uncertainty or pain without being overcome by fear or being deflected from a chosen course of action.

***We admire people of courage, don’t we?*** Call it “bravery”, or “pluck”, or “determination”, or “nerve” or “audacity” - we esteem people with this quality. Life is enriched by those who live with courage.

I believe God wants us to live with courage. For instance, ***courage to face life’s setbacks and hardships***. All of us, at times, face hardships. It’s a part of life. Often life isn’t fair. One

summer when I was in high school, I developed a cough that I just couldn't get rid of. As a result, I was limited in what I could do. I was now allowed to play ball, for instance. It turned out to be a quiet summer in which I did a lot of reading! I began to feel sorry for myself. Poor me. But looking back, it was nothing.

Years later, I developed back problems, and went through a spell of about 7 weeks during which I was pretty much immobilized. I had terrible pain unless I was sitting or lying down. I began to think I would never get better. But again, it was nothing, compared to the amount of *real hardship and suffering* that some people go through.

***When life deals us a bad hand, we have a choice.*** We can whine and complain and pity ourselves. Or, we can take what life brings, and allow God to turn it into something good.

Many of us know of Joni Erickson Tada. She had a horseback riding accident when she was a teenager. As a result of the accident she became paralyzed from the neck down. Yet this woman of faith paints (she holds the brush in her mouth). She has written books. She hosts a syndicated radio program. And in all of these ventures, she shares her faith in Christ.

Jessica Parks is a young lady born without arms. But look at what she has accomplished. (Show video of Jessica flying a plane).

Dave Dravecky was a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, and a follower of Jesus. Dave got cancer. It went into remission, then came back. Eventually his pitching arm had to be amputated. Afterwards, Dravecky wrote a book called *When You Can't Come Back*. In it he shared his pain, anguish, and struggle. He wrote, "What do you do when you can't come back? May God give you the grace to put your hand in his – even if you have only one hand to give – and there may you find peace."

Maybe life has dealt you a serious blow. Some handicap. Some misfortune. You – and all of us – have a choice: We can groan and complain. Or, we can be courageous and ask God to use what has happened for good – to inspire and bless others and glorify Him.

Our Lord Jesus was a courageous man...a model for bravery. Likewise, may we have ***the courage to do what's right (moral courage)***. I prepared a good bit of this sermon a number of years ago. But I didn't finish it; I put it aside. One of the mornings that I was working on this message a strong wind was blowing. I looked out the window and saw that our trash can was blowing around. Then the lid blew off. All of sudden the lid took off, spinning like a tire down the street. I raced out of the house to chase it down. Till I got to it, it was at a nearby intersection. There was a car stopped. A man was stooping down, looking at the rear fender. There lay the lid to my garbage can. It had hit his car.

Oops! I'm going to be honest, and say my first impulse was to turn back, and pretend I had no connection to the trash can lid. But...I swallowed hard, and asked the gentleman, "Did that hit your car?" (The man had a tissue, and was wetting it, trying to rub off a mark that the lid had

made when it hit his car). It was a shiny new Chrysler, and he was treating it as tenderly as a mother with her baby. There was a scowl on face; he was not a not happy camper!

“That’s my lid,” I said. “I’m really sorry....did it put a dent in your car?” “No,” he replied. (Phew). “It should come out with a little wax”, I meekly offered. No comment from him. Finally, he said, “Ok,” and got back in his car and drove off. (I’m sure I didn’t make his day! I’d be upset if it had been my car).

Now my natural inclination when I saw what happened was to walk away. He didn’t know I was the proud owner of that black plastic trash can lid. But it took a little moral courage to tell him the truth, and deal with the situation in a way that was right.

Now, that’s nothing, really, compared to some of the more important moral obligations we have if life and society are to hold together. A long time ago I read a book written by John F. Kennedy when he was still a U.S. Senator. The book is called *Profiles In Courage*. It’s a book about people in politics, political leaders, who at crucial times in our history risked their personal and public lives to do the thing that was the *right* thing to do. It includes some wonderful stories of how some put their political career on the line and showed great moral courage.

Couldn’t we use some of that today! When so many of our politicians only say and do things that will get votes. For instance, some of our political leaders who now vote *against* something that a few years ago they voted *for*, simply to not cross party lines, or not alienate some voters. Have you ever heard of Joe Manchin. He is a Democratic Senator from West Virginia. He was the Democrat who stood several times during the President’s State of the Union Address. He stood when the President talked about energy projects, and when the President spoke against late term abortions. Senator Manchin said he could feel the daggers from fellow Democrats. He said he heard boos, and wasn’t sure if they were for him or for the President! (They might have been boos for both)!

We not only could use a heavy dose of courage from politicians, but we need that kind of moral courage in *every* aspect of life! I think it’s pretty evident that we are seeing an erosion of common decency and morality today: in our language as a culture – vulgar talk, lack of manners; in the media (the TV and film industry, radio shock jocks); in sexual mores. Our generation desperately needs people who have the courage to stand up for what’s right, even if it costs us. Abraham Lincoln once said, “to sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards out of (people).”

Jesus was a courageous man! But you know what, we desperately need people today who have *the courage to follow this Jesus*. The *reason* Jesus set His face with dogged determination to go into Jerusalem, and to face hostile religious authorities, was that *He was on a mission!* He was on a mission to *save the world!* When He courageously went into Jerusalem with a price on His head He faced evil head on: the smugness and self-interest of the religious leaders, the perversion of the Hebrew faith that had become legalistic and lost the essence of love for God and others. As a result, as we know, Jesus was put to death on a cross.

But something bigger was happening. In His on the cross, Jesus was taking upon Himself the *sin and evil of all humanity*. Everything that any one of us had ever done to alienate ourselves from God, from others, from the goodness of life – Jesus took the punishment and condemnation for that. ***He died for us. The question is: do we have the courage to live for Him!***

I became serious about following Jesus when I was a teenager. I went from just going to church, believing in God and believing things about Jesus, to actually *giving Him my life and asking Him to live in and through me*. The more I determined to follow Christ, the more I realized it would take courage to live that way. The language I would use at school had to change. There were friends I didn't feel as comfortable with any more, some of things we had done. It was tough bowing my head and saying grace in the school cafeteria, or trying to love kids who bullied me.

But that's the way it is. Being a *real* follower of Jesus sets us apart from others. Sometimes it takes ***courage*** to stand up and let it be known you're a Christian! The Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible. The setting for that book is the end of the first century. Christians in the Roman Empire once a year had to go before civil authorities, burn a pinch of incense, and say, "Caesar is Lord". This had nothing to do with religion. It was a way you demonstrated your loyalty to the Roman government. You could burn your incense, say Caesar is Lord, and go back and worship as you pleased. But for *real* followers of Jesus, that was difficult. Because they believed only *Jesus* is Lord. Some Christians *had the courage* to say "no", I can't do that. And for some that decision sealed their death at the hands of the Romans.

It was a hellish time for Christian believers. The Book of Revelation was circulated among the faithful to encourage them to remain loyal to Christ – that God was in control and would soon put an end to the persecution they were enduring. For these believers, it took *courage* to be known as a follower of Jesus!

But that's no less true today! Several months ago I mentioned Cassie Bernall in a sermon. Cassie was a student at Columbine High School. She was into drugs, alcohol, witchcraft, a deeply troubled teen. At one point her parents intervened. She made friends with the youth pastor at a church. On a weekend retreat she found Christ, and Cassie changed dramatically. One Sunday evening she gave her testimony to the youth group at church. Two days later, at Columbine High School, her faith was put to the test. Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold knew her. They noticed the Bible stacked on top of her school books. The WWJD bracelet she wore. The question she was asked as a gun was pointed towards her, "Do you believe in God?" Cassie's friend, Kevin Koeniger, later said Cassie paused a long moment, then said, "Yes, I believe in God." The trigger was pulled, taking her life. How would you and I have responded? I can't be sure about myself. I only hope and pray I would have the courage Cassie had!

Will you have the courage to ***live*** for Christ? Fortunately, in our country, to be a Christian doesn't mean we might be martyred (though in some countries today, that's the case). But I do believe, more and more, in our country, to be counted as a Christian means we will take more heat! Will you have the courage, will I have the courage, to live as a follower of Jesus? I hope so! With God's help, we can!

