

The Courage of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Now, our text this evening is in John's Gospel, but first of all, I just want to read a few verses in Mark chapter 14, verses 32 to 36, Mark chapter 14.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, sit here while I pray. He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, he said to them.

Stay here and keep watch. Going a little further, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible, the hour might pass from him. Abba, Father, he said, everything is possible for you.

Take this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will. And then let's turn to John chapter 14 and verse 27 there, where we read these words.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. Especially these last words. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. We never read that Jesus was afraid. We read that he was angry, amazed, troubled, and sorrowful. But we never read that he was afraid. He must have been tempted to be afraid, afraid, because he was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.

Particularly in Gethsemane, here that we've just read about, he must have been tempted to turn away from his appointed task in fear and terror. But it is remarkable that the words fear or afraid or terrified are not used to him, used of him even in that context. The courage of Jesus is one of the remarkable things about him.

[2 : 3 2] And he wants us to have that same courage. Don't let your hearts be troubled and don't be afraid. Here he is giving his disciples. I leave you, my peace I give to you. So the secret of his courage is really in his peace. His courage is not a kind of bravado or arrogance, but a quiet and strong courage. Jesus knew peace with God his Father. But he was giving us peace with God too, so there's no need for us to be afraid. Jesus was at peace with himself more than anyone who has ever lived. He knew who he was, and he completely accepted his identity, his unique identity, the eternal Son of God, yet having taken a human nature. So God and man in the one person. And his peace to us also includes that. As the Apostle Paul said, by the grace of God, I am what I am. He wasn't boasting there, but he was saying it was by the grace of God.

He had whatever particular gifts or aptitudes he had. It wasn't something of his own achievement, but he accepted himself as he was. And there's a great peace in that. Self-acceptance. Not accepting sin or anything sinful in us, but accepting our personality and our gifts and our opportunities and our temptations and our struggles. Jesus was also at peace with his purpose. He knew what he was here to do.

So we too should know our purpose, to love and to serve him. And when we have these things straight in our minds and in the very way we think and the way we live, then we will have his peace. And with that peace, we will have courage, just as Jesus himself had courage. Jesus knew peace so that he could face whatever life threw at him with quiet confidence and courage. And so we're called to follow his example.

Now, let me remind you that we must put this emphasis on following Jesus' example in the right place. You don't get saved by trying to follow Jesus' example. You get saved by trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross and his rising again for us. That's how we get saved.

But then, as those who are saved, we're called to follow him. And literally, the disciples, you remember, followed him. They literally went with him. Now, we don't do it in that sense today, but we are called to follow his example and to learn from him, to take his yoke upon us, to learn from him, because he is meek and lowly in heart, and we will find rest for our souls.

[5 : 58] So, as we think about this matter of courage, about Jesus' courage and the way we're called to follow him, we'll be thinking of that great need for us to follow Jesus' example.

I want to think with you primarily about the courage of Jesus. And we see his courage first in the face of temptation. Every moment of his existence in this world, he was tempted. He was tempted, we're told, in all points as we are in the letter to the Hebrews. Now, think of your very worst temptations, the things that you're really ashamed that you have yielded to these temptations. Jesus faced these temptations to that degree, but also much more, we may say, to the nth degree. Why? Because he never gave in. As soon as you give in to a temptation, the struggle's over. You may have been trying to resist the temptation, but as soon as you give in to it, the struggle's over. There may have been struggle as you try to resist, but then as you give in, the struggle's over. For Jesus, there was no giving in.

And so, the struggle was intense. Every temptation that flesh is heir to, he faced and faced down.

[7 : 33] There's tremendous courage in Jesus in this. Think of the onslaught that he must have faced every day. Only one tiny fraction of it would have terrified us. But he got up every day and faced it with courage.

But think of the specific times of temptation that Jesus faced. In the wilderness, the full seductive power of Satan was turned on him. Yet he didn't flinch for a moment. He faced Satan down with Scripture, with the Word of God. Have we the courage to stand toe to toe with Satan as he comes to us, tempting us? And having done all, will we stand? You know that amazing passage in Ephesians where Paul talks about putting on the whole armor of God, and there's all these weapons and defensive weapons that God has given us that God has given to us to oppose the attack of the evil one. But he says in the end, having done all, you've got to stand. And so often that's the most difficult thing of all, just standing, being beaten down almost by the force of these temptations, but yet standing your ground, trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ to deliver you. So he showed courage in the face of temptation, and we're called to do the same. But also Jesus showed courage in temptation from his friends.

Think, for instance, of just a very small thing, how Nicodemus, a great teacher of Israel, came to Jesus and said, we know that you're a teacher come from God. Now, you know, when we receive praise, when somebody praises us for something, we kind of bask in that glory. But for Jesus, this was not glory because Nicodemus was really misunderstanding who he was. He wasn't just a great teacher. He had come so that people would be born again, and that's what Nicodemus needed to know.

And Jesus had the courage to not just be flattered because of what Nicodemus said, but to actually deal with Nicodemus' real need that he needed to be saved. He needed to be born again.

Or think of Peter who came to Jesus, and when Jesus was talking about the fact he was going up to Jerusalem and there he was going to be crucified, Peter says, this shall never happen to you.

[10 : 18] You know, this was Jesus' friend who would appear out of the best motivation because he loved Jesus, was saying, no, that's never going to happen. And yet, Jesus had the courage to say to Peter, get behind me, Satan. Because he could see even through what appeared to be these loving words of Peter. There was the temptation of the evil one trying to turn him from his appointed task.

It's often more difficult, isn't it, to have the courage to stand up against our friends and what they say and the ways they might want to influence us rather than against somebody who's out and out our enemy. And then we see Jesus facing temptation, particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane. The full terrors of hell were being unleashed against him. There was the temptation to turn aside from his redemptive work. And you know, the opening that Satan had there was really to attack the best of motivations that Jesus had, because Jesus was absolutely perfect. There was no sin in him. And he recoiled from identification with sin. The horror of becoming sin as he bore the judgment of God.

The words that are used there in the passage we read in Mark, they're not ordinary words about fear or terror. But they're words that mean being astounded, being horrified, and deeply distressed or anguished.

[12 : 03] The tremendous struggle that Jesus fought there against this temptation to turn aside from his appointed task because he recoiled from being identified with sin. But Jesus knew his appointed task. He knew what God had promised, and he would not cease to believe that God would vindicate him.

Not my will, but yours be done. That's why he knew unbearable agony, the tension between the temptation and the task. And you know, sometimes we need courage to realize that our strengths can become opportunities of weakness. You know, we may have a gift for speaking, but sometimes we may say too much, or we may say the wrong thing. Our gift may be in action, but sometimes that may be an excuse for not actually speaking out.

Our strength may be in prayer, but again, the temptation may be that we think, well, we're praying for people, I don't need to say anything. You know what I mean. Something that is a real strength can become an opportunity for the devil to distract us.

So, we see Jesus' courage in the face of temptation, and we see how that may relate to ourselves, that we are not to let our hearts be troubled or to be afraid in the face of whatever temptation the devil throws at us. But secondly, we see Jesus' courage in the face of opposition.

Because Jesus was wholly committed to love and truth, he faced virulent opposition. It seems so strange, doesn't it, that the most perfect man who has ever lived showed love and truth to everyone, and yet he was met with hatred and opposition. He met it in his hometown of Nazareth, where he was known, where they said, isn't this the carpenter's son? He didn't shrink from telling them the unpalatable truth. He said, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, but not one of them received help. Only the foreign women received the help. Or there were many lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha, but it was only Naaman the Syrian who received help. And they reacted violently against this, because they had this idea that as the Jewish people, they were highly privileged, and they looked down on those who were Gentiles. He had the courage to speak the truth to them, to make them recognize that all had sinned and come short of the glory of God. But he also had the courage on that same episode to walk right through the crowd who had come to throw him off the edge of the cliff.

[15:14] Such was their hatred against him. You can just picture the scene. It's as if they couldn't withstand his face. They parted like the sea parts before the prow of a ship.

Once when I was a student, there was a student demonstration, it was back in the late 60s, about the university investing in South Africa. And there was a huge crowd, hundreds perhaps, well over a thousand, maybe more, I'm not sure, who were in this demonstration. And there were great speeches being made. And then someone said, let's occupy the library. And the whole crowd went into the library. And there was like a sudden pause. And one man, a young man, stood on the stairs and said, well, we've made our point now, let's all go home. Basically, that's what he said. And everybody turned and went home. It was one of the most amazing things I've seen. But whoever that man was, I don't know who it was. He had the courage to do that in that situation. That's the kind of thing we're talking about here. Jesus had the courage to face opposition and to act with this bravery.

Jesus, of course, faced opposition from the religious leaders, the hostile questioning he had, the accusations, trying to trip him up, you know, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not, whatever. Jesus didn't shrink from engagement with them, because he always viewed it as an opportunity to tell the truth. You know, he said, give me a coin. They showed him the coin and he said, whose picture is on that? Whose writing is on it? Caesar's. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, bringing out a great theological principle that we still refer to today. Jesus didn't shrink from that engagement. But also we see him defending others who are facing opposition. The innocent, those who are being accused wrongly. Think of the disciples. They were walking through the cornfield. They were hungry. They picked some ears of corn and they were eating them as they walked along. And the Pharisees said, aha, you're breaking the Sabbath, because they're reaping and all the rest of it on the Sabbath day.

[17:50] Jesus sprang to their defense. And he said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He also defended the powerless in many different ways. Think of the woman taken in adultery, and they were about to stone him. And Jesus, of course, memorably said, he was without sin, cast the first stone. And then he said to the woman, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.

Jesus had the courage to stand up for others and to speak words of grace into a hostile and vicious situation. But also Jesus had the courage to remain silent against opposition. Sometimes that's the most difficult thing to do, isn't it? Because we read that when he was brought before Herod, who so wanted to see him for so long, he wanted to see him do some miracles or wonders.

Jesus had nothing to say to him. He remained silent. And that should have been a very powerful rebuke to Herod, who didn't take it that way at all, of course. So in all these different ways, we see that Jesus had the courage to face opposition. And in our society today, there's a growing opposition against the Christian gospel, against Christian truth. And more and more, we're going to have to face opposition. And we're going to have to have wisdom and love and grace, but above all, the courage to speak the truth, no matter what. Thirdly, we see of Jesus his courage in the face of evil.

There was various kinds of evil that Jesus faced in his day. There was the evil of demon possession that he faced. Think of Legion, the man who came running out of the tombs towards him after Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee. He was so violent that people were afraid to pass the tombs where he lived. He was threatening towards Jesus, we are many as if he had tremendous power. And Jesus comes across as being completely calm. He focused on this human being in desperate need before him, and he cast out those demons.

And Jesus also faced evil in other forms, of course, things like the illnesses and disabilities and the bereavements that he faced. Day after day, he was confronted with it as people brought all kinds of needs of needs before him, all the evils of this world, all the troubles of this world. And time after time, he commuted a quiet confidence and courage to those suffering. Think of Jairus, whose little 12-year-old daughter had just died, and Jesus said to him, don't be afraid. Jesus had the courage to face up to all these situations and to deal with them. Jesus had the courage to remain calm in a crisis. It's one of the most difficult things, isn't it? When we face a crisis, suddenly the adrenaline is going and we feel we want to be doing something and we don't know what we're to do. And it's the people who remain calm always, isn't it, who actually can achieve something in those crises. Jesus was like that. We're called to be like that too, to have that confidence. Don't let our hearts be troubled, and don't be afraid.

[21 : 32] And then supremely, of course, we see in the case of Jesus that he had courage in the face of death. In John chapter 18, verse 4, we read that Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out.

Now, there are two kinds of courage, at least. There's a kind of foolhardiness that just reacts to a situation almost without thinking, without thinking of the risks. Jesus' courage was different. He knew all that was going to happen to him. He knew that there in the garden he was going to be arrested. He was going to be taken before the high priest. There he was going to be mocked and vilified.

He was going to be taken before Pilate. And there, Pilate was going to order that he be scourged, that he be beaten. It was a beating that often caused people to die. Jesus would be left half dead after that beating. And then he would be taken to a cross, nailed to that cross, and hang there in agony. And he knew that it wasn't just going to be physical agony. It was the agony of being separated from his Father as he bore the sins of the world. Knowing all that was going to happen to him, he went out.

There he was in the garden. He could have got away somewhere. But no, he went out to the entrance. I picture this as the gate of the garden, which would have a wall around it. Jesus went out.

[23 : 16] And knowing all that was going to happen, he still stood there. We see also, of course, Jesus' courage at his trial. He was asked, are you the son of the blessed? Are you the son of God?

God. Now, he knew that if he answered, yes, I am to that, he was going to be condemned. There was the temptation there to become mealy-mouthed, to say something a bit ambiguous.

But what he says is absolutely clear. In Mark's gospel, it's recorded this way, I am. And it was the power of those words especially. And we see that also in the passage in the garden where he said, I am he. It's literally, I am. Which, of course, is the name of God in the Old Testament, the name from which we get Yahweh or Jehovah. It had such power. But, of course, they knew right away that he was claiming equality with God. Jesus didn't back down from confessing the truth.

We know also that with Pilate, he reasoned with Pilate about the truth. Even though Pilate was a Gentile and seemed to be a bit hostile towards him, yet Jesus still spoke the truth to him in that situation. And, you know, that takes tremendous courage for us to speak the truth, whatever the situation is. We're tempted to become mealy-mouthed and to say something a bit ambiguous.

And then there was courage at his crucifixion. There was courage to show compassion. Here was Jesus having been beaten, having to drag his cross. Then, leading up to that place of Golgotha, of Calvary, there were women weeping there as they saw this terrible sight. And Jesus has time to

have compassion on them. And he says, don't weep for me, weep for yourselves, because he could see the trouble that was going to be coming to Jerusalem in years to come. And then the soldiers, as they actually nailed him to the cross, as they drove iron spikes through his flesh and bones into the wood of the cross, what did he do? He didn't curse and swear, as the others would have done, no doubt.

[25 : 50] He said, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. And then to the thief who has been crucified beside him, who said, remember me when you come into your kingdom. He sort of turned around.

He changed his tune. He realized that Jesus was totally different from them. And Jesus said to him, today you'll be with me in paradise. The courage Jesus had in the midst of his own suffering to be concerned about the needs of others. You know, sometimes when we suffer a tiny little bit, nothing like that terrible agony of Jesus. We're so concerned about ourselves, and we forget about the needs of others around us. Jesus was not like that. He had this tremendous courage to face up to the situation and yet to show this compassion.

But when we come to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ itself, we have to say there is mystery at the heart of it. Because we can't even begin to comprehend what he experienced on the cross when he became sin. When the Father turned his face away. When Jesus had to cry out, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me?

All we can say is that he experienced there what we deserve. What the whole human race deserved in its rebellion against God. And we know what we deserve. We deserve hell. We deserve utter separation from God. And as far as we can see, that must include absolute terror, although that is not said about Jesus. But the remarkable thing is that in the midst of that, he still had the courage to pray.

Because those words that tell us of that terrible alienation from God, it's a prayer. Such was his alienation that he couldn't even call God his Father. But he said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Such was the courage of Jesus. As we face all kinds of suffering, and as we may come to face death itself, we may come to face all kinds of suffering, we may come to face all kinds of suffering. And we will hearken to his words when he says, don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid. But follow me.

[28 : 35] Follow my example of courage. And think of the great things that Jesus has done for us. And he has released this power for us by the power of the Holy Spirit, that he will bless his example and his words and his actions to us, so that we may walk in his ways.

Cowardice is a great temptation for the Christian. It's so tempting to take the easy way out, to not speak out, to not stand for the truth, to just keep quiet and hope that the problem will go away and everything will turn out all right. We need to follow the example of Jesus, of his courage, and not be afraid in the face of temptation, opposition, evil, and even death itself.

Death is still the last enemy. But for us, the sting of death is removed because Jesus drank that cup to the very dregs. Don't be afraid, Jesus says. He will be with you every step of the way. Let's join together in prayer.

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