

Courage Comes with Hope in Jesus

Frederick the Great of Prussia once called all his generals together except one, Hans Von Zieten, who couldn't attend because of church commitments. Later, the king again invited all his generals to dine, and this time Von Zieten was able to attend. As they dined, the others made light of Von Zieten's faith and joked about his religious duties. Von Zieten eventually stood, saying to his powerful, absolute ruler: *My lord, there's a greater king than you, a king to whom I've sworn allegiance, even to death. I'm first a Christian man, and I can't sit quietly as the Lord's name is dishonoured, His character belittled, and His cause subjected to ridicule. With your permission, I shall withdraw.* There was silence in the room, because all the generals knew that this was a death wish for Von Zieten. – But Frederick the Great was so struck by Von Zieten's courage that he begged him stay, and promised him he would never again demean his faith. What's it that produces such courageous Christians? Why are they so rare? Why is today's Church so often characterised by compromise and cowardice rather than courage?

To understand the apostles' strength and courage we must first recognize this event took place *after* the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon them. We call it Pentecost simply because it was fifty days following the ascension of Christ and came just as He promised them He would. On that day Peter had stood preaching with the power of God and following that event the authorities began searching for any kind of evidence to silence this sect which was upsetting the status-quo. As Peter and John are led before the Sanhedrin – the principle court of the Jewish synagogue can you imagine it being what we might call the trial of the year? The powers-that-be came out in droves intent on intimidating Peter and John with threats and jail time. The authorities knew they lacked evidence to prove any kind of crime – it was a miracle they had performed - so they used intimidation in hope threats would quiet them, stop them speaking of Jesus. But Peter and John were undergirded by God's Word, perhaps recalling the Torah as Moses recorded long ago, *“Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes before you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.”* [Deuteronomy 31:6]

The apostles acted out of faith in God and because of their experience of His presence in their own hearts therefore they didn't fail when trouble came their way. The pressures of the Jewish leaders could've caused them to give in to the Jewish leaders; however, the evidence of Christ in their lives empowered them to stand before the pressures which came against them. Instead of surrendering, the text tells us Peter responded *boldly* to their interrogators. He not only proclaimed this beggar was healed through the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, but *indicted* the Sanhedrin, connecting *them* to Jesus' crucifixion. The amazed reaction to the apostles' boldness and the Sanhedrin's inability to reply to Peter's scripturally based defense, demonstrated also through personal experience, shows us the powerful effect of the Spirit's filling. Jesus was fulfilling His promise to them, then – as He does for us - now!

It took great courage for Peter and John to stand up and say these things. When I think of the great courage and strength they displayed, and the hope it gave to others, I consider how we display courage in our walk with the Lord. I love a quote from Mary Anne Radmacher, *“Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.’”* Sometimes courage is simply not giving up. Sometimes courage is just holding on. Sometimes courage is just getting out of bed in the morning!

Peter and John aren't the only courageous Christians to stand for their faith. So many in the early church stood for God and paid the price with their lives. Throughout the ages Christians have chosen to pay the ultimate price for their faith in Jesus Christ rather than lose their crown. Today, as Dr. David Jeremiah writes, we live in a world *“where more than 100,000 Christians are martyred for their faith each year”*. Such deaths are largely unreported but if they were what would the world's reaction be? Consider these deaths against the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. which resulted in **2,996** deaths. The most widespread epidemic of in history is currently ongoing in several West African countries with a reported 22,159 suspected cases

and **8,844** deaths. Thankfully the latest report is they've stemmed the flow of the disease and we thank God for that. With that in mind, we still need courage which comes with hope in Jesus. When we know the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it gives us courage to press on, to persevere through the down turns, the turmoil, and the sly deception of the enemy who would turn us from our faith. As has been said, "a bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't".

I think it's tempting to elevate Peter and the other Apostles to superhuman levels; to believe it was different for them to have courage, yet Scriptures remind us Peter and the other disciples weren't always courageous. When Jesus prayed in the garden, He asked them to stay awake, but they all fell asleep. On the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter denied knowing Him on 3 times. The disciples were neither perfect nor superhuman. Even here we're reminded both Peter and John were "*uneducated and ordinary*". They were average Joes, uneducated fishermen, members of the unwashed masses whom the Sadducees regularly overlooked with the pious behaviour; it was because of their faith that Peter and John acted with great courage – courage which made such a big impression that others then believed in the message they proclaimed.

God works in amazing ways! It isn't just famous evangelists and preachers whom God uses; the Lord works through uneducated, ordinary people. God calls all of us, and when we respond to adversity with faith and conviction, we live with a hope that's passed on to others. Our hope, like Peter and John, is in Christ's Resurrection not our efforts; in the assurance God is still on the throne, not in our work to perfect our world; it's in the knowledge that "*He is working out his strategies from the control room of heaven*" [Dr. Jeremiah, Agents of the Apocalypse, pg. 24] which enables us to share courage and hope with our world. Miracles never guarantee everything will work out smoothly; BUT the powerful evidence shown through the proclamation of Jesus Christ, does lead us to bring glory to what God wants to do.

When the Apostles faced false accusations following a night in jail, what set them apart is that they wouldn't bend where it concerned Jesus Christ. This courageousness shown by Peter and John's in their faithful confession, led to the church membership growing to about five thousand men, plus women and children. We therefore learn, through such faithfulness that when Christ is evident, we can stand against the pressures of all forces coming at us from the world. Our acceptance of the name of Jesus Christ and His power provides us with evidence that can't be denied – to us and to those we witness to. ***Let us stand in His reality. Let us be courageous with the Hope that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.***

Luke lets us know that modern "Sadducees" through their pursuit of vested interests in power and comfort and unbiblical notions always perceive the Gospel as a threat (*Maybe that's why their always sad*). Yet we mustn't be cowered into thinking humans have ever or will ever thwart the advance of God's saving work. When we as Christ's church act courageously, seeds of hope are planted among those who've previously not believed. The resurrection of Jesus isn't merely a story we talk about in church, it's the reality which transforms lives. When we bear witness to this reality, we become examples of courage, and courageously come, able to stand alongside those who struggle. We courageously come willing to weep with those who weep. We courageously bear the burdens of our neighbours. We courageously come willing to help average, ordinary people with their problems despite how we may suffer including what may be said about us.

If we will face our world with courage, let us follow the Apostles' example as our challenge and encouragement. Rather than settling for the comfort of human ability, let us ask what may we attempt which can't be accomplished without God's Holy Spirit present in our lives. ***How can we live lives which demand an explanation from others?*** When we do, we'll be filled with God's Spirit as we dare to do what can never be accomplished on our own strength or understood through our own insight.

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God Bless,
Pastor Dave

