

The Courageous Life

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[0 : 00] An employee had been working for a company for about a year, felt it was time for a pay rise. After a lot of deliberation, he eventually went to his boss and asked for it. The boss just took one look at him and said, certainly not. You haven't been here five minutes. In this company, you've got to take your time to really work yourself up. He looked back at him and he said, take your time to work yourself up. That's exactly what I've been doing. Look at me. I'm shaking like a leaf. What does courage mean to you? Is it about just throwing caution to the wind? Is it about suppressing anxiety or is it about pretending that it doesn't exist or is it about completely overcoming it? What does it mean? Mark Twain once wrote that true courage is not the absence of fear, but the mastery of fear.

So let's turn to this passage and there's far more in it than we can possibly unpack over just a few minutes. But it gives us a vital insight as to what courage, true courage looks like. That is not the absence of fear, that's not the absence of terror, but it's the relationship with that as we see it played out in the hands of Jesus, who is simultaneously God and human.

This is that mystery of what theologians have always referred to as the incarnation.

That Jesus is fully God and fully human. He is fully human and he's fully God. The light of the world that's come into darkness. And so as we see him staring the reality of the cross, torture and death in the face, we see him as a fully human being wrestling with that. And yet we see God in human form wrestling with that. Now, how we begin to get our minds around what that means, well, that's something that's perplexed theologians for as long as the gospel has been around.

But what we certainly have here is a sense of fear. And overcome by courage.

[3 : 02] This was arguably the most critical moment in history. Now, you could say that the most critical moment in history is the cross itself. But what we've got going on here in Gethsemane seems to be something of that critical moment upon which whether the cross happened or not depends.

And again, part of that whole theological mystery of what it means for Jesus to be fully human and fully God is, did he have to go to the cross? Does the possibility exist that he might not have done? Well, if God is completely the definition of love and is absolutely love and there is no greater love than that, then you could argue that perhaps the cross was inevitable. And yet, can we really say that the cross was inevitable? Surely there was this sense of decision that was within it. In order for love to exist, surely the choice has to be made in order to go through with it. Now, these are things that are beyond our human understanding. But it just gives us a sense of the intensity of this moment.

That what we have enshrined in this moment is Jesus, the man who is fully human and yet is fully God. And is faced, confronted with this decision. And I want to suggest that it is a decision because what we see here is the wrestling with it.

Had Jesus not gone to the cross, my guess is that the New Testament would never have been written and we would have never have heard of him. The point is, is as far as these things lie beyond, as much as these things lie beyond the grasp of our human minds, what we have here is the intensity of the moment. The man who is fully human and is fully God, wrestling, wrestling with the cross that awaits.

[5 : 08] And what we see here is what courage in the widest, deepest and fullest sense played out looks like. So Peter goes off to pray with Peter, James and John.

Now, it's not the first time that this has happened. And our thoughts can go back to that moment when Jesus went off with these three men to the mountaintop to pray.

And what came to be referred to as the transfiguration happened. Where earlier on, where they were together on the mountaintop, there was this blinding light.

There was this loud voice as thunder from heaven saying, this is my son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. But this time, Jesus, now in a garden with Peter, James and John, there's no bright lights.

There's no mysterious clouds. There's no voices from heaven. There's no words of affirmation.

There's Jesus. And the only thing we hear is the prayer that goes from his lips.

[6 : 33] And what I want to suggest is that perhaps there's a sense in which this connects with our own human experience at times. Yes, there may be those, what we could call mountaintop spiritual experiences. But there are those times when we see what courage really looks like, when actually there's no such things as that.

And it feels like we are utterly alone. And the only words we hear are our own words. And we do not hear a sense of God speaking back to us.

We just hear the reality of our fears and our pleading. And I want to suggest that there's a key moment within this story where we're shown what true courage really is.

And it's in verse 36 where Jesus prays, take this cup from me.

Take this cup of suffering from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done. What I want to suggest, without oversimplifying things, and I'm sure there's far more than can be said, but what I want to suggest is that what we see there in just those few words are two expressions, two dimensions, if you like, of what true courage really means.

[8 : 05] And the first is the first part of those words, where Jesus prays, take this cup from me.

Take this suffering from me.

I don't want to go through this. Take it away. Save me from this. Now, at face value, you could argue that's not courage.

That's trying to avoid the situation. That's trying to say, what lies ahead? I don't want to. Get me out of here. I want to escape. Stop it from happening right now.

But what I want to suggest to you is that actually the opposite is true. That true courage lies in the honesty of being able to face up to reality as it is and to bring God into that, knowing that we need God and that only God can face us.

Only God can help us. And the reason I say that is that time and time and time and time and time and time and time again, we hear stories of people who have overcome challenges and situations and they've got from a terrible place to an amazing place.

[9 : 14] They've got from a place of utter devastation and brokenness to a place of renewal and hope and life and becoming actually what God wants them to become. And the reason being is that change has happened and whilst that journey from being right down there to being right back up there may have been a long, gradual and complex one, somewhere in there lies that moment of facing up to reality where they grasp that nettle and they stare it in the face and say, yep, something's got to happen.

I need some help. How many times would there have been a situation where somebody has made it through some kind of addiction, whether that be to a substance or whether it be to a lifestyle or whatever, but they've made it through and the key critical moment was the moment when they realised it can't go on like this.

It's got to change. Take this from me. Or maybe somebody's been, looks back on and they're now in a restored and renewed relationship but there was a time when they looked like there was no hope whatsoever for that relationship and there came that point of recognition, that moment of truth where they dared to face reality in the face and say, I can't go on with this.

It's got to change. In all sorts of different ways and there will be as many versions of these stories as there are Christians in the world today who have known what it is to be transformed by the Holy Spirit but there will be stories where we've gone from one spiritual state where God has not seemingly been part of our lives to a part of a spiritual state where God is very much a part of our lives and there's a huge contrast between those states and it may be a southern one, it may be a gradual one or it may be something between a combination of the two but somewhere in there has been that point of recognition that we need God and that has involved some sense of staring reality in the face and not chasing away from reality, not denying it, not turning our back on it but actually daring to look at it in all its ugliness and to know furthermore and perhaps most importantly that we need God and that if we try to actually either run away from that reality or we try to pretend that he's

not there then in fact we're kidding ourselves.

Now I'm not suggesting for one moment that Jesus' experience here is one where he's turning back to God having not been following his father. I'm not suggesting that but what we do see going on in the dynamics of his prayer is Jesus, the fully human being, facing reality and facing the cross and everything that he knows that that represents and crying out to his father in honesty and in agony, I don't want this.

[12 : 21] I don't want this. If there's any way that this can be different, father make it so. And what I want to suggest is there is the most tremendous sign of courage in that prayer.

And perhaps that may be where we need to be when there are realities going on in our lives that we perhaps feel afraid to confront. Perhaps because they just seem too big and too complex or too intimidating.

or maybe we recognise them but somehow we just don't want God to get a hold of them fully because we're frightened of what he might do with it. We know that God's there deep down inside but perhaps we might even follow him in some way but there's this bit of us that we're just a little bit afraid that if he gets hold of it what's going to happen.

What we see in these words of Jesus is that that turning point in our lives where courage really true courage comes into play is the recognition that things are going to change.

The recognition of reality before us and the recognition that we need God our Father to be part of it. Father take this away from me please.

[13 : 53] But Jesus doesn't stop there in his prayer and that's the point because as his prayer continues we see this deepening and this widening and this strengthening of courage because the second part the second dimension and I want to suggest the deeper stronger dimension is the words lies within those words yet not what I want but what you want God.

And sometimes we can only get to that place when we've actually gone through that first prayer and we've had the courage to face up to the fact that what is ahead of us we just don't want and we actually plead with God to take it away if that's a possibility but then having held that prayer to submit with that sense of trust that even though it doesn't make sense to us we believe that God's view of things is bigger than our view of things and therefore we can say that even though I don't want this I'm trusting you Lord that you know what you're doing trusting our uncertainty into that sense that God's kingdom God's purposes are bigger and wider and deeper than our understanding of where we are right now and the circumstances in which we find ourselves now that's a tough call that's a tough call because it involves sacrifice it involves self-denial and those aren't fashionable things even within the contemporary church we've bought into this idea so much so and it's you know we can understand where it comes from we talk about how being a Christian is about living life fully and about enjoying life and about knowing all of God's blessings in our life that's all true but the danger can be that we so overplay that that we overlook the reality that life is hard and that Jesus came into this world not to suddenly take away all of our problems and to make life really easy and straightforward and simple not this side of eternity but that rather in Christ

God comes to us to help us with those situations and to see ourselves through the battles that we face in this life now when we know that God is with us by his Holy Spirit that he's with us that he's around us that he's within us then of course we are unstrengthened and we are empowered but it doesn't necessarily mean that those challenges are taken away rather we are given the strength to face those challenges but that's a difficult thing for us to face up to the thing is is that we can have this sense of what we feel is right for us and what's in our best interest and yet God may think otherwise and that's where the courage of that prayer but not my will but your will be done truly lies let me give you an illustration I don't know if you remember a few years ago quite a long time ago there was a series I think it was the BBC series featuring two at the time quite well known personalities called Trini and Susanna they were fashion experts do you remember them they did a series called

What Not to Wear they did another rehash of that series I can't remember what it was called but anyway there was a number of different versions of these programs around and Trini and Susanna were fashion experts and they would people would come on the show and sometimes they were celebrities some of the other people would just write in and they would go through their entire wardrobe and they were ruthlessly critical they would say now that looks terrible or it is terrible on you just get rid of it and then they would completely redesign them give them new outfits and the point was was they were actually trying to make them look as best as they possibly could look not to

sort of criticise them or be horrible but actually bring out the very best in them now I used to watch this program with Tamara who loved the program so I used to find that it was on and I used to sit down and I would enjoy it too that's my theory and I'm sticking with it the program was fascinating actually because what I found really really fascinating was the the responses that people would make when they faced criticism of the choices that they had made and whether they were willing to trust the view of these people who dealt all the time with trying to help people look the best that they possibly could and there was one particular episode where there was a particular celebrity that went on there and they were going to a big

I don't know some charity gala thing and they'd already bought this outfit and they thought they were convinced that they looked absolutely great Trini and Susanna thought the opposite in fact they said we're going to be really honest with you here because that's what we're here to do you look terrible frankly you look awful in that outfit what led you to choose it we don't know but we genuinely believe that you could look absolutely fabulous and this whole programme went through all the reasons as to why this was a bad choice but they took them out and with loads of effort they went through bought this new outfit and all the rest of it was due to go to this she was all dressed up ready to go to this particular event all the cameras were on and she went through it was like a red carpet event wearing this new outfit and then the next scene we find out that she'd actually slipped into the loos and changed back in to her original outfit now looking around some of you here are going now forget about the content of that programme and the theme of that programme and forget about the whole issue of Trini and Susanna and this celebrity and outfits and all the rest of it what you've got there is a principle of somebody going to somebody else who is entrusted as being an expert and they give you their expert opinion and you can make the choice as to whether you go with it because they have your interest at mind or you can completely throw it out the window let's take another image let's imagine that you walk in to your GP and you manage to get a face-to-face appointment that's going to take quite a bit of imagination to start with but let's just imagine that that happens yeah and you're sat there before your doctor and you say to them a whole list of ailments different aches pains every time you bend in a particular way you get a particular flinch of pain or whatever it is whatever the it doesn't matter what it's to do with but you give them a whole list of everything that's wrong with you then you turn around and you go out do you see what I'm getting at if we're not careful we can end up with a version of Christianity that effectively turns God into the one that we bring to our views of what we should and shouldn't be doing and say to God here's my plan for my life

[21 : 30] God now please bless it and that's it now Christian faith growing as a disciple of Jesus involves bringing our own ideas of our lives to him of course it does and in fact we see that playing out within Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane where Jesus brings in honesty and openness before his father I don't want to go through with this if this cannot happen father please make this not happen and that's a courageous prayer to pray but it's not the end of the prayer and we see true courage pray out as Jesus stares to pray to his father yet it's not what I want it's what your will is father and true courage as we see defined by

Jesus in this story it's the courage that dares to stay in there and to hang around even when we don't like what we hear even when those words that come back or whether it may not be words at all in prayer but the circumstances remain and we take one look at them and frankly we hate them and yet deep down inside we know that that is what God is saying you're going to have to go through with this but I'm with you and that involves trust it involves sacrifice it involves that willingness to accept that we may not be right even though we cannot understand why not and to hang around and to stay in there and to keep on staying in there knowing that even though our view of things can't make sense of it

God's view of things is bigger and greater and we're going to pray right now but as we come to pray I'm going to ask each and every one of us just to think about what courage might look like or needs to look like in our own lives right now because that will be different for each and every one of us but just take a few moments to think about that question what does that courage or that need of courage look like for you right now take a few moments just to think about it I'm not going to ask you to talk about it with anyone except God so take a few moments and just ask yourself that question what does having courage look like for you right now where would you want that courage and as we come to pray just remember this that sometimes often that need for courage actually translates into that need for patience to hang on in there knowing that in God's time

God will you know it was after the battle of Waterloo that it is reckoned that well Wellington actually said that our men were no braver than the enemy but they were brave for five minutes longer so let's pray in the stillness of this moment let's hold before God whatever our answer to that question looks like what does courage or the need for courage mean for you now Lord we hold before you our own lives and our need for courage and we're all at different points and different things going on in our lives

Lord firstly we would pray that if it is possible to remove those things that would cause us to suffer that that would happen Lord we believe that you are the God of transformation the God of miracles and that you can do anything Lord help us to have that courage to face up to those realities that need change Lord secondly we know that there are some situations that for reasons we don't understand won't necessarily change or change in the way that we would like them to but that you can change us and that you can give us that boldness that strength that courage whatever we need so Lord we pray that not just in this moment but in the days weeks whatever it might even be months or even years ahead that we would have exactly that courage that you can give us that courage that you gave to your son

[27 : 22] Jesus that courage that knows that your will is so far bigger and greater than our will because your vision is so bigger and greater than our vision here on earth so Lord give us that courage by the power of your spirit now and in the time to come in Jesus name we pray Amen Lordrative Lord and Lord Lord as we he as