

Courage for the cause of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] I just say again, Happy Lunar New Year and Happy New Year. It's January, it's that time of year where we look forward to the year that's been, we celebrate maybe what's been, we certainly, or the year that's coming, but also look back and reflect upon the year that's been, lessons learned, things like that.

Reflection, however, is not something that we tend to do, it's not something that is a habit nowadays for most people, that is the ability to assess what has been, learn the lessons from it, and make the necessary changes as we move forward into the future.

What we tend to do is escape. Moment of January, moment where things may be not as busy, we self-indulge, we escape into TV and movies and holidays and everything else, rather than actually pause and reflect.

So this series in January here is really an opportunity for us to spend some time reflecting and looking forward to the year that is, and what might it be to run the race of discipleship into 2023.

Now one of the things that I've always found helpful throughout my life, and particularly my Christian life, is to get close to people, and I'm looking at what does it look like to run the Christian life, is to get really close to people who have run the race and are further down the track than I am, and to learn lessons from them, even if they've been dead for 200 years.

[1 : 4 5] There is so many lessons to learn for those who have not just started the race, but actually run the race all the way to the finish line.

And so I want to encourage you as Christian brothers and sisters to read biography, to read biography, to learn the lessons of those from the past.

And so in this January series, we're looking at, we're really basing it on Hebrews 11, Hebrews 12, to be people of faith and to run the race of faith, and particularly where Hebrews 11 talks about the great cloud of witnesses, based on them, run the races before you.

And so we've tried to throw a couple of extra people into that list of Hebrews 11, of great cloud of witnesses, and today I want us to introduce one more person to that cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, who have run the race and finished the course.

And that is, today is John Patton. So let me pray, and I'll launch into that. Gracious Father, as we look at one life, a life redeemed by you, sovereignly guided by you, empowered by you, a life lived well for your glory, I pray that you would give us the gift of reflection, as we consider our own life, the choices we're making now, and whether or not it is ultimately for your glory or for our own.

[3 : 2 2] And I pray, Father, that the mission of Matthew that has just been thrown in front of us would be the mission that drives us, a mission to see all people come to know and to love you, and we ask it for your sake.

Amen. A chain of islands in the Pacific were discovered in 1606 by Spain. They were named New Hebrides in 1773 by Captain James Cook, and in 1980, the New Hebrides gained its independence from Britain and from France, and was named Vanuatu.

John Williams and James Harris from the London Missionary Society landed in 1839 as the first Christian missionaries.

And this is what was written about them. Within a few minutes of their touching land, both were clubbed to death, cooked and eaten.

The London Missionary Society sent another team to the island of Tanner in 1842, and these missionaries were driven off within seven months.

[4 : 39] Now, just think about that for a moment. That's just not history. Just think about that. Matthew just read out to us, go to all nations with this discipleship message, and it's 1,800 years before that message hits the New Hebrides.

1,800 years. 1,800 years. What was the church doing? Anyway, that's not my main point.

Now, that's the remarkable missionary context of the life and the ministry of John G. Patton, a missionary to the New Hebrides who landed there 16 years after Williams and Harris.

So today, if you've got your St. Paul's app, open it up, you'll see an outline for my message in there today. I want to look at the life of John G. Patton. I want to look at the courage of John Patton, and I want to look at what was the source of Patton's courage for the gospel.

Most of my information comes from autobiography of John Patton, published in 1889. This is the 1965 edition of that.

[6 : 10] So again, encourage you to read biography and learn from those in the past. Patton was born in Scotland in 1824. He sailed for the New Hebrides via Australia with his wife Mary in April 1858.

They reached the island of Tanner on November the 5th of that year, and four months later, both his wife and his brand-new-born son died. He served alone on the island for the next four years in constant danger until he was eventually driven off in February 1862.

For the next four years, he travelled around Australia and Great Britain, raising awareness of the work of the Presbyterian mission in the New Hebrides.

He married again in 1864. He took his wife Margaret back this time to the smaller island of Anewa. They laboured together there for 41 years.

When they came to Anewa in November 1866, the islanders in that place were destitute.

[7 : 24] They were cannibals who had, by that time, only occasionally ate people, but it was normally their enemies that they ate. And Christian missionaries were enemies.

They practised infanticide, that is the killing of infants, widow sacrifices. So if your husband died, they normally killed you so that you could be with him in the afterlife.

They would... A number of other things. He and Margaret laboured in those conditions for 41 years, hard conditions.

In the next 15 years, within 15 years of his landing, the entire island of Anewa turned to Christ. Remarkable.

That in itself is remarkable. To go from cannibalism to life in Christ is remarkable. Margaret died in 1905 in Kew, Victoria.

[8 : 28] Patton outlived her another two years. He died in Canterbury, Victoria. In January 28th, 1907. Both are buried in Kew, Melbourne. You can visit their tombs today.

This coming Sunday... Sorry, this next Sunday will be 116 years since his death. And his legacy is remarkable.

Vanuatu nowadays has a population of around 250,000 people. Around 94% of that population are confessing Christians.

73% claim to be Protestant Christians with the largest group, the Presbyterian Church. With 550 congregations with over 70,000 people affiliated with that denomination.

That's more than Sydney Anglicanism. And a large part of it, they track it back to John G. Patton.

[9 : 41] So, that's his life. That's his legacy. Let's look at his courage. One of the things that stands out as you read his life is that he was a man of just incredible courage for the cause of Christ.

Incredible courage. And I've got a few things I want to mention. He had courage to make the advancement of the gospel, his greatest and highest priority of life, even as a teenager.

Mark that. Even as a teenager. In his teens, he had an opportunity to further his career prospects as a surveyor, which was, you know, in his day and age, that was unheard of.

This guy did not come from some, you know, wealthy connected family. And so, this was a remarkable opportunity for effectively a peasant boy.

He was called into the boss's office and was promised promotion and special training entirely at the government's expense. And the only condition was that he signed a seven year engagement contract.

[10 : 57] This is what he wrote about that moment. Thanking him most gratefully for his kind offer, I agreed to bind myself for three years or four, but not for seven.

Excitedly, he said, why? Will you refuse an offer that many gentlemen's sons would be proud of? I said, my life is given to another master.

And so, I cannot engage for seven years. He asked sharply, to whom? I replied, to the Lord Jesus.

And I want to prepare as soon as possible for his service in the proclaiming of the gospel. In great anger, he sprang across the room, called the paymaster and exclaimed, accept my offer or you are dismissed on the spot.

His anger made him unwilling or unable to comprehend my difficulty. The drawing instruments were delivered up, I received my pay and I departed without further parley.

[12 : 15] Secondly, he had courage to overcome the criticism that he received from respected elders for in fact going to the New Hebrides New Hebrides as a missionary.

A Mr. Dickinson who he described as a dear old Christian gentleman tried to deter him from the New Hebrides.

The cannibals! You'll be eaten by cannibals! Now remember, Williams and Harris were eaten by cannibals 19 years earlier.

Patton's response. I love it. Let me read it to you. I'll put my tone on it. I'm not sure it's Patton's tone but I can't read it with any other tone.

Mr. Dickinson, you are advanced in years now and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave there to be eaten by worms. I love the moxie of this guy.

[13 : 19] I really do. I confess to you that if I can live but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus it will make no difference to me whether I'm eaten by cannibals or by worms.

And in the great day my resurrection body will rise as fair of yours in the likeness of the risen Redeemer. That is a remarkable perspective on life.

He writes that another objection came up was this. He said the rejection is there are heathen here at home. Why on earth would you leave Chatswood for goodness sake?

Let us seek and save first of all the lost ones perishing at our very doors. This I felt to be most true and an appalling fact.

But I unfailingly observed that those who made this retort neglected these home heathens themselves. And so the objection as from them lost all its power.

[14 : 32] They would ungrudgingly spend more on a fashionable party at dinner or tea on concert or balls or theatres or on some ostentatious display or worldly and selfish indulgent ten times more perhaps in a single day than they would give in a year or in half a lifetime for the conversion of the heathen world either here or abroad.

I do and always did only pity them as God's stewards making such miserable use of time and money entrusted to their care.

Can you see why I'm doing it? It's an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak to each one of us about our time and our priorities our talents our treasures.

Thirdly he had courage to risk losing his loved ones for the cause of the gospel. I've already mentioned this he and his wife first wife Mary arrived on the island of Tanna in November 1858 their baby was born February 1859 four months later yeah four months later Mary then died within a few weeks of the birth of the baby on the 3rd of March the baby boy died less than three weeks later on the 20th of March Patton himself dug the graves with his own hands right beside the house the little sort of shack that he had built for them as a family and to add to his grief he slept on their graves to protect them from being dug up by the cannibals.

you see the courage to risk the loss of a loved one is one thing the courage to experience the loss and to press on alone with the same mission is remarkable I felt her loss beyond all conception or description in that dark land but feeling immovably assured that my God and Father was too wise and loving to err in anything that he does or permits sovereignty of God goodness of God I looked up to the Lord for help and I struggled on in his work he had the next thing he had the courage to face the constant threat to his own life from the islanders I think this is what makes this autobiography reading like a like a thriller in his first four years of

[17 : 25] Tanner he moved from one crisis to the next crisis to the next crisis like constant crisis it's like he's fully charged flight or fight you know all the time there's no pastoral retreat there's no weekend escape to the beach or the mountains or you know there's none of that it's not a quick trip overseas he's there by himself all the time he writes my enemies seldom slacken their hateful designs against my life however calmed or baffled for the moment a wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket and though often directed towards me

God restrained his hand I spoke kindly to him and attended to my work as if he had not been there fully persuaded that my God had placed me there and would protect me till my allotted task was finished looking up in unceasing prayer to my dear Lord Jesus I left all in his hands and I felt immortal till my work was done one of the most remarkable things about Patton's dealing with danger is he often rebuked his enemies to their faces for their bad behaviour even as they held an axe over their head to bring it down on his head remarkable here's another one one one morning at daybreak I found my house surrounded by armed men and a chief intimated that they had assembled to take my life seeing that

I was entirely in their hands I knelt down and gave myself away body and soul to the Lord Jesus for what seemed to be the last time on earth rising in other words rising from that prayer I went out to them and contrasting it with all of my good contact towards them at last some of the chiefs rose and said our conduct has been bad but now we will fight for you and kill those who hate you so they're fickle it's a remarkable thriller lastly on the idea of courage and there's many other ones he had the courage to face the criticism that he did not have the courage to die I mean how dare you do that after four years the entire island population rose against him and finally a wonderful answer to prayer as a ship arrived just in time to take him off the island in response to this after four years of risking his life hundreds hundreds of times losing his wife losing his child he recounts this incident one dear friend said you should not have left you should have stood at the post of duty till you fell it would have been an honour been to your honour and better for the cause of mission had you been killed at your post welcome home from your missionary service how easy it would have been for him to respond with that moment of discouragement well

I've had enough of this church it's not suiting my needs I'm done I'm done how easy it would have been for him to respond with that but courage he pressed on for another four decades of fruitful ministry on the island of Inewa and in fact around the world they reckon John Patton was the impetus that God used to increase global mission in a remarkable way from Europe to other parts of the world most of us don't even know he existed so let me just go now to the source of John Patton's courage because where did this remarkable courage for the cause of Christ come from now there are a number of things let me say I think that each one of these things would be a sermon in and of itself I've already referred to his trust in

God's sovereignty God's control over all circumstances including including the ability of a native with a musket to pull the trigger of that musket he said that guy will not be able to do that if God does not enable him to do that totally under God's control he also had a very strong sense of God's call on his life to be a missionary to the southern seas but I want to mention two firstly his courage came from his father James Patton that is a guy like John Patton doesn't come from a vacuum even if you don't read anything else in this autobiography the tribute that he pays to his father is worth the price of buying it if you can buy it anymore I'm not sure if you can it is remarkable the first 75 80 pages absolute remarkable tribute to his father father his father's prayer life stands out particularly as being extraordinary and it had a deep impact upon his children there was a small room in their little little cottage that they had a very small cottage like three bedrooms three rooms sorry not three bedrooms three rooms

[24 : 05] I can't remember I think there was like eight kids raised there very different from nowadays where parents need retreats and everything and his dad would go to that small room and he would pray it was called the closet he would pray and the impact on John Patton was immense how much my father's prayer at this time impressed me I can never explain when on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in family worship we he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the heathen world to the service of Jesus and for every personal and domestic need we all felt as if in the presence of the living saviour and learned to know and love him as our divine friend prayer prayer covered his discipline of his children challenged by this if anything really serious this is if anything really serious required us to be punished he retired first to his closet for prayer and we boys got to understand that he was laying the whole matter before

God this is a man let me just pause before I say anything else this is a man 60 odd years later reflecting on this as a kid we loved him all the more when we saw how much it cost him to punish us we were ruled by love far more than fear and then there's this quote about his dad no hurry for market no rush to business no arrival of friends or guests no trouble or sorrow no joy or excitement ever ever prevented us at least kneeling around while our father led our prayers to God and offered himself and his children to there

James Patton's commitment to his local church also had a remarkable impact on the young John James was an elder in the Presbyterian church in Scotland it was about four miles away from the family cottage and in 40 years in 40 years he missed church three times 40 years and just so that we know that that's not an exaggeration John mentions the three times once when the snow was so deep it was impossible couldn't get there secondly once when the ice was so bad that his father was forced to crawl back home on hands and knees because he had fallen over multiple times attempting to get to church and once when there was an outbreak of cholera and all commuting between villages was banned and just to make sure the farmers and the villagers in his area turned up to the pattern home to plead with

James not to go to church because they didn't think cholera would stop him from going to church this commitment to a public devotional I mean I reckon I could feel like I could stop there and let the Holy Spirit challenge all of us on that one this commitment to a public devotion life had a profound impact on John and his brothers and sisters he wrote each of us from very early days considered it no penalty no penalty but a great joy to go with our father to church the four miles were a great treat to our young spirits one scene which often moves me when I read it one scene best captures the depth of love and I'll just give you a shortened version of it the depth of love between

John and his father and the power of the impact of John's life of uncompromising courage and purity for the cause of Christ the time came for the young John to leave home he went to Glasgow for theological training he called a divinity school from his home to the train station was a 40 mile walk 60 kilometres walk no Uber or anything back in those days and they weren't wealthy enough to own a horse or a carriage or anything like that and he wrote this is him writing 40 years after leaving home for this journey so regard that this is an older man my dear father walked with me for the first six miles of the way his counsel and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are as fresh in my heart as it had been but yesterday and tears are on my cheek as freely now as then whenever memory steals me away to that scene for the last half mile or so we walked together in almost unbroken silence his lips kept moving in silent prayers for me and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain we halted on reaching the appointed parting place he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence and then solemnly and affectionately said

[30 : 42] God bless you my son your father's God prosper you and keep you from all evil in tears we embraced and we parted and this is this is the impact of James Patton right here vowed deeply and off by the help of God to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonour such a father and mother as he has given me James Patton's greatest desire for his children was that they would live for the cause of Christ and John Patton in that moment is declaring this is in page 25 26 of the biography in that moment declaring that I will live in such a way to honour my father's God you see

John Patton didn't just spring up from nowhere James Patton courageously and sacrificially laboured hard to produce not just a son but many children like this and if it wasn't for John Patton we wouldn't even know James Patton existed but what a legacy secondly and this is the main source of his courage for the cause of Christ because even in the moments his dad's not going to be enough his courage came from his own deep personal fellowship with Jesus this is him on page 359 hence the promise of

Matthew 28 lo I'm with you always to the very end of the age was the heartbeat of his life Jesus promised that I will be with my disciples always was the heartbeat of his life and it's in fact inscribed on his grave in Melbourne the context of this promise of Jesus to be with his disciples is the context of the great commission to go and make disciples more than any other promise this one brought Jesus close and real to John Patton in all of his dangers as he was making disciples there was a measles epidemic that killed thousands of islanders and the missionaries were blamed for it and

John wrote this during the crisis I felt generally calm and firm of soul standing erect and with my whole weight on the promise lo I am with you always precious promise how often I adore Jesus for it and rejoice in it blessed be his name one of the most powerful in my view one of the most powerful paragraphs in his autobiography describes an experience where he's hiding in a tree at the suggestion of this fickle unreliable chief you know the island is coming for Patton this fickle unreliable chief says let me take you to this special place and hide you in a tree how do you feel secure yes he had no idea where he was being set up but this is what he writes being entirely at the mercy of such doubtful and vacillating friends

I though perplexed felt it best to obey I I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush the hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday I heard the frequent discharging of muskets and the yelling of the savages and yet I sat there among the branches as safe as in the arms of Jesus never in all my sorrows did my Lord draw nearer to me and speak more soothingly in my soul than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves and the night air played on my throbbing brow as I told all of my heart to Jesus alone yet not alone if it be to glorify my

[36 : 34] God I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree to feel again my saviour's spiritual presence to enjoy his consoling fellowship see what he's saying there when I was all lost Christ was all to me and it was beautiful it was a joy to be in that tree because Christ was closer to me Patton finishes his recounting of this experience of close fellowship with Jesus with a question for his readers and I would suggest it's a question for all of us this is on page 200 of the autobiography if thus thrown back upon your own soul alone all alone in the midnight in the bush in the very embrace of death itself have you a friend who will not fail you then in other words do you know the friend of friends who will never leave you or forsake you that's the challenge of

Patton Hebrews chapter 12 calls us to look to Jesus the friend of sinners and to run the race of faith in him John Patton is one who ran that race of faith with increasing joy in Jesus as he communed closer and closer with Jesus in all the circumstances of life so I want to ask you as we set out into 2023 what is your next step how is Patton challenging you what is your next step to commune closer with Jesus this year