

Union

# Courage

How the Gospel Creates  
Christian Fortitude

**Joe Rigney**



“Joe Rigney’s *Courage* is a bellwether, defining and defending a virtue that every Christian will need in abundance in our anti-Christian age. Rigney’s book is a gem and a must-read. It is surely a book that I will be rereading often.”

**Rosaria Butterfield**, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age*

“In a world paralyzed by fear yet attracted to displays of conviction, boldness, and fearless action, there is an opportunity for the joyful virtue of Christian courage to shine. In *Courage*, Joe Rigney not only provides an explanation of courage and where it derives from but also issues a call to courage for the glory of God. It’s fantastic. I pray God uses this little book to stir big things in the hearts of many.”

**Erik Reed**, Pastor and Elder, The Journey Church, Lebanon, Tennessee; Founder, Knowing Jesus Ministries

“Take heart, Christian! As Christians in the West watch their societies increasingly turn against their Christian roots, this call is particularly relevant. Compromise and cowardice are contagious—but so is courage. With clear definitions, introductory forays into classical virtue theory, and inspiring examples drawn from Scripture, Narnia, and elsewhere, Rigney seeks to foster virtue for faithful witness to Christ. I am confident this book will do just that for many readers.”

**James R. Wood**, Assistant Professor of Ministry, Redeemer University

“The apostle John tells us that the coward’s portion is in the lake that burns with fire. That means that courage is not some optional virtue for a select set of Christians. All of us need godly courage to unflinchingly face the unique challenges and battles of our time. Joe Rigney helpfully shows us what courage looks like—in men, in women, in stories, and in our Savior—so that we can gain the stability of soul necessary to be courageous in every trying time.”

**Abigail Dodds**, author, *Bread of Life* and *(A)Typical Woman*

“Joe Rigney has quickly become one of the pastoral voices I trust most for discernment and wisdom when thinking through any topic. His treatise on courage—which explains that bravery is a habit we learn by rightly ordering our fears and setting our minds on God’s promises—demonstrates why. In a culture where arrogance is so often mistaken for boldness and recklessness for strength, Rigney offers practical advice on how to draw true courage from biblical wisdom. In his encouragement to preach about unpopular sins and his counsel on developing courage appropriate to one’s sex, he demonstrates how much he himself possesses the virtue he is writing about.”

**Megan Basham**, Culture Reporter, *The Daily Wire*; author, *Beside Every Successful Man*

Courage

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## **Growing Gospel Integrity**

Michael Reeves, series editor

*Worthy: Living in Light of the Gospel*, Sinclair B. Ferguson

*Courage: How the Gospel Creates Christian Fortitude*, Joe Rigney

*Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness*, Gavin Ortlund

# Courage

How the Gospel Creates  
Christian Fortitude



**Joe Rigney**

**■ ■ CROSSWAY®**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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## Series Preface

GOSPEL INTEGRITY IS, I suggest, the greatest and most vital need of the church today. More than moral behavior and orthodox beliefs, this integrity that we need is a complete alignment of our heads, our hearts, and our lives with the truths of the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul issues a call to his readers to live as people of the gospel. Spelling out what this means, Paul sets out four marks of gospel integrity.

First, he entreats, “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27a). The people of the gospel should live lives *worthy* of the gospel.

Second, this means “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27b). In other words, integrity to the gospel requires a *united* stand of faithfulness together.

Third, knowing that such a stand will mean suffering and conflict (1:29–30), Paul calls the Philippians not to be “frightened in anything” (1:28a). He describes this *courage* as “a clear sign” of our salvation (1:28b).

Fourth, Paul writes:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (2:1–3)

Paul thus makes it clear that there is no true Christian integrity without *humility*.

The simple aim of this series is to reissue Paul’s gospel-based call to an integrity that means living *worthily, unitedly, courageously, and humbly*. We need to recognize, however, that these four marks are not abstract moral qualities or virtues. What Paul has in mind are, quite specifically, marks and manifestations *of integrity to the gospel*. As such, the books in this series will unpack how the gospel fuels and shapes those qualities in us.

## SERIES PREFACE

Through this little series, may God be glorified, and may “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (4:23).

Michael Reeves  
Series Editor



# Introduction

A TEENAGER IS MOCKED AND REJECTED by his classmates because he holds to biblical teaching on sexuality and biblical standards of morality.

A husband and father wrestles with whether to continue in his present job or take the risk of starting his own company.

A wife faces another day with a harsh and emotionally distant husband.

A mother is diagnosed with aggressive brain cancer while pregnant with her third child.

A Christian employee faces pressure in his office to fly a rainbow flag in support of LGBTQ+ initiatives.

A pastor prepares a biblical sermon on a topic he knows will displease some in his congregation.

A missionary prepares to take his family to an unreached and unengaged people group that has historically been hostile to the gospel.

A new convert must decide how to tell his Muslim family that he has embraced Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Treasure.

Each of these situations is different, and yet each of them requires the same thing—courage. This is a little book about courage. My aim in writing it is not merely to describe a virtue but to foster it. And not just any kind of courage, but Christian courage. My aim is that in reading this book, your heart would be strengthened by grace to overcome your fears and face the dangers before you with gladness and joy.

The connection between courage and joy may not be obvious to you. But the Bible unmistakably links them. So let us begin by establishing this basic link between courage and joy by considering Philippians 1 and three key concepts that appear there: boldness, courage, and fearlessness.

### **The Setting**

Paul opens his letter with a profound expression of gratitude and joy for the Philippians. This church has partnered with Paul in the gospel from the very beginning (1:5). This shared mission and fellowship gives Paul great confidence that the

Philippians will persevere to the end because God will finish his work in and among them (1:6). Paul's confidence is grounded in his deep affection for these saints: he holds them in his heart, he partakes with them of grace, and he yearns for them with Christ's own affection. His affection for them expresses itself in rich prayers—that God would multiply their love and knowledge, that they would love what is good and excellent, and that, in so doing, they would be found pure and blameless at the coming of Christ.

Following this greeting—which is distinguished by the total absence of correction or expression of concern—Paul then seeks to update the Philippians on his own situation. More importantly, he seeks to rightly frame his own imprisonment and sufferings for the Philippians so that they can wholeheartedly join him in the gospel mission. This is where our key words come into play.

### **Emboldened by Imprisonment**

Paul begins by informing the Philippians that his imprisonment has surprisingly served to advance the gospel. This is deeply counterintuitive. We would naturally assume that imprisoning Paul would be a setback. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. And the word of Christ is heralded by apostles and missionaries like Paul. So how



can imprisoning the missionary advance the mission? Paul gives two reasons.

First, everyone involved in the situation knows that Paul has been imprisoned *for Christ*. He has borne witness to Jesus, even in his imprisonment, so that his jailers are clear about why he is in prison. As Paul says elsewhere, while he may be bound in chains, “the word of God is not bound!” (2 Tim. 2:9). The word of Christ is being sown, and perhaps even taking root, among the imperial guard. And this, of course, makes sense to us. Paul has simply found a new mission field, so that even his imprisonment has served to advance the gospel.

But then Paul gives a second reason, and we are again faced with a counterintuitive reality. “Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Phil. 1:14). The brothers have been emboldened *by* Paul’s imprisonment? This again puzzles us.

We might naturally assume that the imprisonment of the lead apostle would depress preaching—that the other brothers would grow quiet and muted because Paul is in jail. This is, no doubt, what the authorities intended. Make an example of Paul. Show the other Christians what happens when you stir up trouble with this so-called gospel. And yet, far from shrinking back into silence, the other brothers have been

emboldened to speak. They are taking more risks, daring to teach what might land them in prison along with Paul. How is this possible?

At this point, Paul merely notes that their bold and fearless preaching comes from their (increasing) confidence in the Lord. Something about Paul's imprisonment has deepened their faith and reliance on Christ. Paul, of course, knows that not all of the newly emboldened preachers do so from right motives. Some are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry. They chafe under Paul's fruitfulness and want to see him taken down a peg. They hope that their preaching will harm Paul, that his afflictions will increase because of their ministries (Phil. 1:1–17). (How much do you have to hate someone in order to preach the gospel with the aim of harming him?)

But others—that is, those who are speaking the word from their confidence in the Lord—are preaching “from good will” (1:15). They preach out of love—for Paul, for the saints, for the lost, and for Christ. They see Paul's imprisonment as a divine appointment; they know he's there for the defense of the gospel, commending the good news about Jesus to the imperial guard, the Roman authorities, and all who would hear of it.

Paul is not concerned about motives; he simply rejoices that Christ is proclaimed. Whether in pretense or in truth, whether

from envy or good will, whether out of rivalry or out of love, Paul wants to see the gospel advance. And he sees that advance happening through his own ministry in the prison, through the bold preaching of faithful brothers, and even through the insincere preaching of envious brothers. Paul rejoices *whenever* and *however* Christ is truly proclaimed. Full stop.

### **Honoring Christ in Life and Death**

But this is not all that Paul rejoices in. He also rejoices in his coming deliverance. This deliverance, he is sure, will occur through the prayers of the Philippians and the help and support of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it's likely that Paul expects the Holy Spirit to uphold him in his imprisonment and affliction as an answer to the prayers of the Philippians. Notice how Paul describes deliverance: "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20). The deliverance Paul expects and hopes for is not merely salvation from physical danger. It may include such temporal salvation. But the deliverance he anticipates through the prayers of the Philippians is ultimately the perpetual honoring of Christ in his body, come what may.

Or we could put it the other way around. What would it mean for Paul to *not* be delivered? For Paul, to dishonor

## INTRODUCTION

Christ in life or death would bring shame upon himself, and he would not be delivered.

This is a gut check for all of us. Paul sees imprisonment and the possibility of death as a threat, as a danger. But it is not a threat merely because he might die. It is a threat because the prospect of pain, suffering, and death might lead Paul to dishonor Jesus in his speech and actions, in his living and his dying. Is that how we see our afflictions and suffering? Are we mainly concerned that the suffering end? Or, like Paul, are we mainly concerned that we magnify the worth of Jesus in the midst of our suffering?

We must press deeper into Paul's frame of mind here. What does he mean that "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death"? Consider the next verse: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). The word "for" signals that Paul is explaining how he hopes to honor Christ by life or death. And sure enough, he immediately talks about living and dying. If we connect the two verses, we can draw these conclusions:

- Christ is honored in Paul's life when Paul's living is Christ.
- Christ is honored in Paul's death when Paul's dying is gain.

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Now what does each of these mean? What does it mean to say, “to live is Christ”? How is it possible for death to be gain? The passage continues:

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. (1:22–26)

“To live is Christ” means fruitful labor. It means Paul will remain in the flesh, on earth, working for the progress and joy in the faith of the Philippians and the other churches. His presence with them will provide ample opportunity for them to give glory to Jesus. On the other hand, “to die is gain” means that Paul desires to depart and be with Christ—which is far better than remaining in the flesh.

So, to bring the whole picture together, we can say this: Paul is in prison. He is facing the prospect of suffering, affliction, and potentially death. He might be released.

He might be executed. He faces an uncertain and painful future. And yet he rejoices because he is fully confident that God will deliver him. The same providence that made the gospel fruitful in prison will make Paul faithful to the end. Deliverance for Paul means that he will honor and magnify Christ in his body, no matter what comes, whether by release from prison and life or by execution and death. Christ will be honored in Paul's life when the aim of Paul's living is Christ—fruitfully laboring to increase the joyful faith of the Philippians. Christ will be honored in Paul's death if he receives death as gain because being with Christ after death is far better than every good thing he loses on earth.

And here's the relevance for this book: Paul calls facing life and ministry and suffering and death in this way *courage*. "Full courage" (1:20). Christian courage is a desire-driven, glad-hearted treasuring of Jesus as the greatest good in the face of looming danger or death. And such Christ-treasuring courage in the face of death magnifies Jesus.

### **Fearless in the Face of Opposition**

We've seen the surprising *boldness* of Paul's brothers when he is imprisoned. And we've seen Paul's own Christ-treasuring *courage* in the face of death. The chapter ends with Paul

inviting the Philippians to join him in this bold and courageous fearlessness.

Before exploring what Paul says, I should clarify what fearlessness means. Fearlessness does not mean an absence of all fear. After all, it's clear that we must fear the Lord. Moreover, many forms of fear are perfectly natural responses to pain and hardship. God has designed us to recoil from pain (whether physical or emotional), and thus fear (of pain, of death, of other loss) may be present in us without necessarily being sinful.

In understanding fearlessness, then, we might consider its opposite—fearfulness. To be fearful is to give in or be mastered by one's fears. It is to succumb to fear, to allow fear to guide and direct our actions. To be fearless, then, is to master one's fears. Fear may still be present (in fact, later I will argue that courage, at one level, *requires* the presence of fear). But the fearless man conquers his fear. It doesn't rule him; he rules it. Fear is there, but is not his master. With that clarification, we can return to Philippians 1.

After expressing his confidence that God will deliver him from death for the sake of his fruitful ministry and that, therefore, he will come to the Philippians again, Paul instructs them about what to do in the meantime: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27).

The language here calls to mind other places where Paul describes conduct that is in step with the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14), walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), and walking worthy of the calling to which we've been called (Eph. 4:1). In all of these cases, the idea is that there is a kind of conduct, a way of life, that fits, adorns, and expresses the truth of the gospel. Paul calls the Philippians to live such a worthy life.

He then goes on to describe what that worthy life looks like. He identifies three things he hopes to hear about the Philippians—three elements that make up the manner of life that is worthy of the gospel. First, he hopes to hear that they are “standing firm in one spirit” (or perhaps, “one Spirit”—1:27). Second, he hopes to hear that they are “with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). Both of these highlight a kind of gospel-grounded unity and single-mindedness among Christians. In the first case, the unity is an immovable firmness. In the second, the unity is a relentless labor and pursuit. But the common thread is that the manner of life that is worthy of the gospel is one in which Christians stand and labor for the gospel *together*.

The third element concerns us most directly. Paul hopes to hear that the Philippians are not frightened in anything by their opponents (1:28). In other words, the life worthy



of the gospel overcomes all fear of men. Such fearlessness is a sign of judgment for the church's opponents and of deliverance for God's people. Both of these—the judgment and the deliverance—are from God.

We may rightly ask why we should be so fearless in the face of opposition. Paul is ready with an answer: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (1:29–30).

The source of Christian fearlessness lies in the recognition that God has given us two things: he has granted us to believe in Jesus and to suffer for Jesus. Both the faith that unites us to Christ and the suffering that comes from that union are gifts from God. Knowing that both are gifts steels us in the face of our enemies. Opposition to the church does not arise haphazardly; it is not random or arbitrary. It is a gift from God. Therefore, when we Christians encounter such opposition in anything, we do not fear. Such fearlessness fits reality and is worthy of the gospel.

## **Conclusion**

*Boldness. Courage. Fearlessness.* These are the watchwords in Philippians 1. In the remainder of this book, my aim is to

deepen our understanding of these words. What is courage? Where does it come from? What is its opposite, and how can we resist that? What is Christian boldness, and how is it expressed? And how is courage expressed differently in men and women?

But before turning to these deeper questions, I want us to see one more crucial element about courage in Philippians 1. It has to do with the connection between the growing boldness of Paul's friends, his own courage in the face of death, and his exhortation to fearlessness for the Philippians.

Recall the two surprises from the beginning of the chapter. The gospel surprisingly advances through Paul's imprisonment because his brethren are emboldened to speak the word without fear. And they are emboldened because Paul's imprisonment has surprisingly increased their confidence in the Lord. How does this work?

Here's the principle. Seeing courage spreads courage. Seeing boldness awakens boldness. Seeing fearlessness overcomes fear.

Paul is in prison, facing the possibility of his own execution. But he is not despairing or depressed. He is happy and hopeful. He does not view his imprisonment as a setback. Instead he views it as an opportunity for gospel advance. He preaches to his jailers and proclaims the good news about

Jesus to the whole palace guard. He seeks to make Jesus impossible to ignore among his captors. He wields the word without fear.

What's more, he expects to be delivered—meaning, he expects that God's Spirit will empower him to magnify Jesus, no matter what comes. Paul has a desire-driven, Christ-treasuring courage in the face of looming loss and death. For him, to live is Christ and to die is gain, and this reality works in him indomitable courage in the face of opposition, imprisonment, and death.

When Paul's brothers and fellow workers see his courage, their confidence in the Lord grows. Paul's courage is contagious. They catch it, and their courage grows. They are literally *encouraged* by Paul's courage. And because Paul's courage is rooted in seeing Christ as his greatest treasure, his brethren's confidence is not in Paul but in Christ. They are confident *in the Lord*. And their confidence in the Lord produces boldness in the face of opposition. They are *emboldened* by Paul's boldness and speak the word without fear in the face of opposition.

And the boldness of the brethren rebounds back to Paul and strengthens his own faith. He hears that they, inspired by his example, preach Christ sincerely, from love and good will, and he rejoices in the proclamation of Christ. His joy is so full that he even rejoices when he hears that his opponents

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are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry. Paul's joy abounds because Christ is proclaimed.

And then Paul tells the Philippians about it. He reframes his own imprisonment as an opportunity for gospel advance. And he reminds them that they are “engaged in the same conflict” he is. They have opponents. Paul has opponents. They have enemies and threats before them. Paul has enemies and threats before him. And just as Paul's courage encourages his brothers, so also Paul intends his courage and the courage of his brothers to foster fearlessness in the Philippians. Paul invites them to join him in his joy-driven courage. They must pray for him, as he prays for them. They too must walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. They too must stand firm together, strive for the faith of the gospel together, and fearlessly preach the good news together.

The lesson of Philippians 1 is clear. Courage is contagious. Boldness spreads. Fearlessness is infectious. And when these virtues are caught, Christ is magnified.



## Defining Courage

CLASSICALLY, COURAGE (or fortitude) is one of the four cardinal virtues (alongside wisdom, temperance, and justice). When we speak of virtue or excellence, we mean the perfection of something, like a diamond that has been cut and polished to reveal its true splendor. When speaking of moral virtue, we're speaking of the perfection of the will. According to Jonathan Edwards, "virtue is the beauty of the qualities and exercises of the heart, or those actions which proceed from them."<sup>1</sup>

Virtue begins with desire. We start with a kind of inclination or disposition toward some good thing. When that inclination is activated and we move toward the

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 539.

good thing, we call that *desire*, and when we arrive and possess the good we aimed at, we say that our desire has been gratified or fulfilled. If the thing we are after is really good, and if we repeatedly exercise that inclination, we can begin to speak of virtue. In other words, it's the regular, habitual exercise of good inclinations and desires that we call virtue.

Theologians frequently distinguish between God's common work and his saving work. We sometimes refer to God's common grace and his saving grace. Common grace is common to believers and unbelievers alike. Saving grace is given to God's people alone. Likewise, then, common virtues are common to believers and unbelievers alike. Uncommon virtues are specific to Christians.

And this is where the proper framework for thinking about virtue is important. Courage, like other virtues, is present, in some measure, among both Christians and non-Christians. At one level, courage, gentleness, prudence, justice and mercy, stewardship, forgiveness, patience, courtesy, generosity, temperance, humility, compassion, and faithfulness are all common virtues. And common virtues are *virtues*. It's good that they exist, and it's good to ask God for his common grace to produce such virtues among non-Christians. But they are not necessarily true virtues.

True virtues are virtues that God works in us by transforming us by the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, true virtues are acts flowing from union with Christ. They are not simply good in a narrow sense, if we only consider human and earthly relations. They are good in an absolute sense, because they flow from faith in Christ and love to God.

Put another way, as we explore the virtue of courage, the animating principle matters—not just the external action, as important as that is. We believe that the life of the virtue—the dynamic principle that moves us to habitual action—really matters. It matters that God is the source, means, and end of our virtues.

It matters if we want our virtues to please God, because “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

Consider two passages from the Sermon on the Mount:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 6:1)



In both cases, the virtue is performed before others—light shining and righteousness practiced. One of them is commended; one of them is condemned. There's a way of being seen by others that doesn't please God, and a way that does. First Peter sheds some light:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (4:10–11)

When we serve, we serve as stewards of God's grace. He works in us what is pleasing in his sight. We serve in the strength he supplies, because the supplier of strength is the receiver of the glory. This is why Paul is regularly expressing the paradox of the Christian life: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

And so, as we reflect on the virtue of courage, as we explore the habitual exercise of this good inclination, we want to ensure that God is honored as the source, means, and goal of our virtue. “From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36).

### **The Paradox of Courage**

The present chapter focuses on the common virtue of courage. We begin with G. K. Chesterton. “Courage,” he says, “is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.”<sup>2</sup> This is true, not only of higher and nobler forms of courage but even of the earthly and quite brutal forms of courage.

“He that will lose his life, the same shall save it,” is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. It might be printed in an Alpine guide or a drill book. . . . A man cut off by the sea may save his life if he will risk it on the precipice. He can only get away from death by continually stepping within an inch of it. A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine

2 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), chap. 6, Kindle.

a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset, then, we must recognize the paradoxical character of courage. All courage implies a kind of double vision, even a division, within us. On the one hand, there is the danger, the threat, the thing that provokes fear in us. On the other hand, there is the reward, the prize, the thing that we desire so much that we overcome our fear and face the danger.

Both the danger and the reward have objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively, there is the external danger—suffering, pain, affliction, death. This danger awakens fear in us, so that we subjectively are afraid. We naturally recoil from the pain; we seek to avoid suffering and especially death. Paul succinctly identifies both dimensions in 2 Corinthians 7:5, when he refers to “fighting without and fear within.”

<sup>3</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chap. 6.

Likewise, the reward has an objective dimension. Life, honor, the deliverance of those we love—all of these are set before us, on the other side of the danger. And just as the danger awakens fear, so these awaken desire. We want to live. We want to receive honor (or at least, we don't want to be shamed). We want to preserve the life and safety of those we love. And so, in the face of the danger, we resist the natural recoil—the impulse to run away or shrink back—and instead we press on. We press through. We take the risk. We endure the pain. We lose our lives (or at least risk them), in hope that we will save them (or the lives of others).

Crucially, courage always appears in the face of real danger. No danger near, no courage needed. More importantly, courage only appears in the presence of real fear. No *fear*, no courage. A man who, on a foggy day, ignorantly walks along the edge of a dangerous precipice is not showing courage. His ignorance insulates him from fear, and therefore from courage. Make him aware of the cliff, then the fear will rise, and with it, the possibility of courage.

### **Fear and Desire**

So then, courage always involves a double vision concerning danger and reward, fear and desire. Let's think more

deeply about the relationship between fear and desire. First, fear and desire are inescapable concepts. It's not a question of *whether* we will fear but *what* we will fear. It's not a question of *whether* we will desire but *what* we will desire.

Second, fear and desire both have to do with good things. We desire good things, and we fear the loss of good things. And these are often reciprocal. The goods we desire are the same goods we fear to lose. We desire to live, to make a living, to have a good reputation, to be healthy and prosperous, to have meaningful relationships, to live with purpose. Similarly, we fear the loss of life, of livelihood, of reputation, of health and wealth, of relationships, of purpose.

Third, fear and desire are matters of moral concern. In other words, there are things we *ought* to desire and *ought* to fear. This will require some elaboration.

In his lectures published as *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis introduces the notion of the Tao. This is his term for the objective rational and moral order embedded in the universe, or what we sometimes call *natural law*. Lewis demonstrates that a belief in the Tao, in the objective moral order of the cosmos, was common to all ancient cultures and civilizations. (He took the term *Tao* from Eastern religions

precisely to communicate this universality; he wanted to avoid the suggestion that a belief in an objective moral order is somehow merely a Western, European, or Christian belief.) Here's Lewis:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit* our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.<sup>4</sup>

Central to the Tao is the doctrine of objective value—“the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.”

Those who know the *Tao* can hold that to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which *demand*s a certain response from us whether we make it or not.

4 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 14–15.

. . . And because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it).<sup>5</sup>

So then, attitudes and emotional states (such as fear and desire) can be right or wrong, moral or immoral. Lewis goes on to unpack the doctrine of objective value in terms of the principle of proportionate regard. This simply means that we should *value things according to their value*.

“Can you be righteous,” asks Traherne, “unless you be just in rendering to things their due esteem? All things were made to be yours and you were made to prize them according to their value?” . . . St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.<sup>6</sup>

5 Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 18–19.

6 Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 16.

And, we might add, to desire and not desire, to fear and not fear what he ought. So, to return to the question of fear and desire, we can now say that not only are fear and desire inescapable, but they are moral and they can be arranged in a kind of order or hierarchy. We can speak of ordered loves and ordered desires and ordered fears.

### **Levels of the Soul**

Now we come to a fourth fact about fear and desire. Fear and desire are passions. Passions are the immediate, impulsive, and almost instinctive motions of the soul. They are our snap reactions to the way we read reality. We call them passions because we are *passive* in the face of them. They are not actions we take (though, as we'll see, we are responsible for them). Instead, they happen to us, fall upon us, arise within us. The Bible regularly speaks of fear falling upon people (Luke 1:12; Acts 19:17) or coming upon people (Luke 1:65; Acts 5:5) or filling people (Mark 4:41; Luke 2:9) or seizing people (Luke 7:16; 8:37).

Passions were classically divided into simple passions—desires for or aversions from certain things—and arduous passions—complex desires for or against things in the face of obstacles and difficulty. Simple passions include love, hate, desire, and sorrow. Arduous passions include hope, fear, daring, and anger.



While passions are movements of our souls, they are also closely tied to our bodies. That's why the Bible frequently refers to them as the passions or desires of the body and the flesh. "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions" (Rom. 6:12). "The passions of the flesh . . . wage war against your soul" (1 Pet. 2:11).

But though passions are tied to our bodies, they are not automatic processes like digestion and breathing and growth. Nor, as we noted above, are they under our immediate control.

A picture begins to emerge of different levels in our experience as embodied creatures. Think of these like floors of a building. In the basement our automatic processes drone on—breathing, pumping blood, digesting food, and growing. These bodily processes are subrational and involuntary; they occur apart from any choices or decisions on our part. On the top floor is our intellect and our will, the level of reasoning and choosing. Then there is the middle level, the level of the passions. The passions are semirational and semivoluntary. They are snap reactions based on our quick judgments and perceptions of what is happening around us or what may happen to us. This middle floor we share, in some measure, with animals. Animals don't reason and choose as humans do. But they do recognize things as dan-

gerous or desirable, feel fear or desire in response, and then react accordingly.

### **Fortitude and Daring**

With this picture of a layered or tiered psychology, we can better understand the division or conflict that creates the possibility of courage. Lewis again is very helpful in *The Abolition of Man*. He notes that our desires, appetites, and instincts are powerful, so powerful that “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.”<sup>7</sup> Unchecked, our passions become strong enough to master us. Syllogisms and arguments, he notes, are insufficient to keep our nerves and muscles at their post in the middle of a bombardment. The intellect needs something more to govern the passions.

We were told it all long ago by Plato. As the king governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the mere appetites by means of the “spirited element.” The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat, as Alanus tells us, of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest—Magnanimity—

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 24.

Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man.<sup>8</sup>

For Plato, this “spirited element,” this liaison officer between the top floor of the intellect and the middle floor of the appetites, is the seat of courage. Courage is a kind of resoluteness of mind in the face of difficulty and hardship. The conflict we experience is between the passion of fear (at the middle floor) and our higher desire to cling to what is good (or to avoid what is evil). Courage is a habitual, sober-minded self-possession that overcomes fear through the power of a deeper desire for a greater good.

Courage, then, can manifest in at least two different ways. On the one hand, courage strains toward what is good in the face of risk or danger. It gives and hazards all in the face of uncertainty. We might call this risk-taking or daring.

On the other hand, courage clings to the good in the face of pain or pleasure. Courage resists the impulse to retreat or to flee in the face of hardship, difficulty, pain, even death. It also refuses to be drawn away from its post by promises of lesser reward. This we call fortitude or endurance.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 24–25.

Both of these expressions of courage appear in the passage from Philippians 1 we examined in the previous chapter. The manner of life that is worthy of the gospel includes both a “standing firm” (fortitude) and a “striving together” (daring). The latter suggests forward movement and progress. Daring takes the hill. The former suggests immovability. Fortitude holds the hill already taken.

In both expressions, courage avoids excesses on either side. Most obviously, courage is the opposite of cowardice. Cowardice shrinks back from danger. It succumbs to fear and therefore refuses to take risks, or retreats in the face of pain, difficulty, and death.

At the same time, courage is the opposite of recklessness or rashness. Courage is guided by reason and wisdom; it recognizes what should and should not be feared, and it keeps the bigger picture in view. Courage distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary risks. A man may risk his life for a thrill—scaling a cliff without rope or skydiving out of an airplane. Or he may risk his life to save others from danger—rushing into a burning building to rescue a child or going to war for his country. Thrill seeking may be a kind of daring, but saving lives at the risk of one’s own death is courageous. The reason for the risk matters.

## Conclusion

So then, we may summarize the general picture of courage as follows. Courage involves a kind of double vision. It attends to both the danger or hardship before us and the reward and good beyond. Courage arises in the midst of internal conflict in the face of external hardship. Fear of pain and desire for pleasure, aversion to evil and movement toward good—these tensions create the context for courage. Fear and desire are inescapable, and courage rightly arranges our fears and desires so that we fear what we ought and desire what we ought.

Courage is a stable habit of the heart that masters the passions, especially the passion of fear, through the power of a superior desire (or a superior fear). Desire for the respect of one's fellows (and fear of being ashamed before them) steels one's nerves in the face of physical danger. Or love for one's family conquers anxiety for one's personal safety, and we rush back into the house to save them from a fire.

Courage, seated in the chest, follows wisdom's guidance and subdues our passions. This is why, as C. S. Lewis says, "courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality."<sup>9</sup> If we are only chaste or honest or noble

9 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 161.

when conditions are easy, then we are not truly chaste or honest or noble.

Courage takes risks in the form of daring without falling into the excess of recklessness. Courage endures hardship in the form of fortitude without succumbing to passivity or cowardice. And whenever we encounter genuine courage, we find it unmistakably beautiful and noble. It is a lovely virtue, one that all men admire.

Such is the general or common virtue of courage. But this book is not merely about the common virtue. It's about the Christian virtue. So how does this natural virtue become supernatural? What turns common courage into holy courage? To that question we now turn.