

## Faith, Courage & Obstacles [Joshua 1:1-9]

We have a young Paralympian in our congregation just back from training in Europe. If there is one thing that describes paralympians, they are courageous, skilled athletes who focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. They are people who have overcome significant adversaries and have achieved great progress in their lives. These young athletes have had the courage to overcome and the courage to keep on keeping on. And we applaud them.

The interesting thing is that authentic encounters with the living God often leave physical challenges: On the road to Damascus, a man named Saul met Jesus. The blazing light threw him off his horse and left him blind for several days. In the Old Testament, Genesis records the story of Jacob wrestling and prevailing with the angel of the Lord, but leaving that experience with a permanent limp [32:22-31].

When Joshua was handed the reigns of leading Israel into the Promised Land, he was an experienced army general, at this point about 80 years old. The aging process did not have the same effect as it does today [i.e. Deut. 34:7]. Interestingly though, of all people, you wouldn't think Joshua was in need of a pep talk on courage. He was an experienced warrior and intercessor. He was Israel's general next to Moses. And he and Caleb were the two spies who came back from checking out the Promised Land with positive reports.

Courage is an important quality of a follower of Christ. Numerous examples of courage are found throughout biblical history. You can probably think of a Bible character of whom you respect because of the life of courage they lived or a daunting experience they overcame. Courage in life is not just for superheroes of the faith; courage is for everybody, but it's not necessarily a given, is it?

There is a certain law of nature that goes like this: "everything takes the path of least resistance." Whether it is electricity flowing, rocks falling, or water running, things follow the path of least resistance when left to themselves. Have you ever noticed a river and how it differs from a canal? Canals are straight because they are man made. But a river meanders around all kinds of angles and obstacles and may actually take twice the distance than a canal does -- why? Because left to itself a river will naturally follow a path of least resistance, if it hits a hard spot it will simply go around it rather than try to go through it.

Human nature is the same way; in our fallen sinful condition we tend to take the path of least resistance! It is natural to follow easier ways rather than tougher ways. Only with the power of the Holy Spirit do we find the courage and strength to press through hard places.

An evangelist friend, Roger Smets told us that after years praying for his son, he finally gave up and one night said to his wife, Gwen, "Honey, I don't think Dwayne is going to come back to the Lord." Gwen responded like, "How dare you say that. If you don't believe it then you can pack your bags mister." And it wasn't too long after that they got a call from their son saying he was going to Bible College and God had called him into ministry.

In the natural, courage is the ability to confront fear in the face of pain, danger, uncertainty or intimidation. It is a fortitude that must be maintained by the individual.

As a teenager, I remember being bullied in school and finding the courage to counter it with physical force. In one instance it was a boxing ring; in another it was restraining a schoolmate in the hallway. It may not have been the most spiritual response, but it was what I knew at that time in my life.

We've all heard stories of courage, maybe none so poignant as that of Aron Ralston. Aron Ralston is an experienced mountaineer who went out alone on a relatively benign hike in April of 2003 through a slot canyon in the Utah desert. He became trapped when a half tonne boulder dislodged and caught his right arm. For five days, with little food, less water and virtually no chance of being rescued, Ralston used drastic means to extend his life, from drinking his own urine to rigging ropes and webbing to support his weight. Unable to budge the boulder with a makeshift pulley system or break it with a multi-tool, Ralston escaped by torquing his arm against the rock to break his bones, then ripping through his flesh with a small, dull knife, he freed himself by severing his own arm, gaining an unexpected second chance at life. His bloody stump wrapped in a makeshift sling, Ralston repelled down a 20-metre drop, then hiked 10 kilometres through the desert experiencing an improbable sequence of events, including stumbling across a family of hikers and getting to a helicopter in the nick of time. There's no question of the courage that took, is there?

In spiritual terms though, courage begins by personal resolve, but more importantly by trust in God. When Goliath threatened the armies of Israel, there was no soldier with guts enough to face this Philistine giant. In fact when he appeared the Israelites all ran from him in great fear [I Sam. 17:32-50]. We could say that the difference between David and the Israeli soldiers was that soldiers looked at the obstacle Goliath, and figured it was too big to hit, but David looked at the obstacle and figured it was too big to miss.

The way you look at any obstacle in your life makes all the difference.

David's courage was based on relationship with God; it was based on believing and seeing God intervene in past circumstances. He recalled how God had strengthened him to defeat and kill the lion and the bear.

Where did David get his courage? *First* of all it grew out of his theology – his understanding of God. David was “a man after God's own heart”. *A person cannot be a “man after God's own heart” unless he knows the heart of God, and this comes through an understanding of God through His Word.* David was a master at knowing the Word of God.

And he also knew God historically. David knew the way God delivered Israel in the past through miraculous interventions defeating Israel's enemies. But he also knew God experientially [vs 34, 35] We all have experienced God do something significant in our lives. That is the basis for our courageous response to whatever obstacles we may face in the now and in the future. David knew that through His God he would do valiantly. He said to Saul, “The Lord will deliver me.” He said to Goliath, “I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty...this day the Lord will hand you over to me.”

If we bring God into the equation, we have overwhelming odds in our favour. Someone has said that obstacles are what we see when we take our eyes off the goal. Discouragement comes when we leave him out of the picture.

Hearing of the great conquests of Joshua and Israel, the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into believing they were a poor people from a far land and as a result Joshua made a peace treaty with them that couldn't be broken. [Josh. 9:19,14-18] The men of Israel did not inquire of the Lord. If you don't ask, you don't get. Inquiring of the Lord is the basis of all courage. This is one of things that David did almost ad-nauseam [I Sam. 23:1-5]

Isn't it true that we often forget to do this? Or we refuse to or don't think it's important? We need to reprogram our psyches if that is the case, because clearly inviting God to your party is a good thing.

King Hezekiah and the people of Judah had every reason to be afraid. They were threatened by the armies of Assyria – the most powerful nation in the world. Many of Judah's neighbours had been captured or destroyed already. Now Jerusalem was surrounded by an enormous army ready to attack. Hezekiah knew his troops were no match for the Assyrians. How could the king instil courage in his countrymen in the face of such a threat? [II Chronicles 32:1-8, 20,21] He approached the problem in two ways:

1. Hezekiah spoke [Vs 7,8]

Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid or discouraged; there is a greater power with us than with them; with them is only the arm of the flesh; with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles. And the people gained confidence

2. Hezekiah prayed [Vs 20,21]

God answered the prayer of Hezekiah and Isaiah, but it doesn't always come out that way. Courage doesn't mean successfully overcoming everything in this life. Illness has taken countless numbers of courageous people who have fought valiantly. Courage is not determined by comparisons — comparing yourself with someone else or someone else's obstacle. Courage is believing and trusting God to enable you face every circumstance believing for God's will to be done. The apostle Paul wrote, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so...Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

But if you're reading this Foursquare pastors, you are alive. So be enCOURAGED that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.