

## THE SOURCE OF COURAGE

Acts 16:16-40

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Memorial Day Weekend, May 29, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### SCRIPTURE

*One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out,*

*‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’*

*She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit,*

*‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’*

*And it came out that very hour.*

*But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said,*

*‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’*

*The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice,*

*‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’*

*The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said,*

*‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’*

*They answered,*

*‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’*

*They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

*When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying,*

*‘Let those men go.’*

*And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying,*

*‘The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.’*

*But Paul replied,*

*‘They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’*

*The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.*

Since Easter Sunday most of our preaching has focused on the earliest days of the church through the experiences of the Apostles.

- We have seen them *marvel* at the appearances of the risen Jesus even when they didn’t immediately recognize him.<sup>1</sup>
- We have seen them rendered *speechless* and gazing *heavenward* at the Ascension.<sup>2</sup>
- We have seen them *burst forth with joy* at the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>3</sup>

And we have seen thousands drawn to the Gospel that *Jesus* unleashed and *they* proclaimed as the story of his life, death, and resurrection spread<sup>4</sup> from its base in Jerusalem, to Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

But these earliest Christians also faced resistance and persecution. In the passage before us today, Paul and Silas order an evil spirit out of an enslaved girl and render her unable to practice the fortune-telling that has made quite her owners “a great deal of money.”

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Luke 24:13-39.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:6-11.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:37-42.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:8.

It is important to notice what happens to Paul and Silas:

- They are seized.
- They are dragged into the public square before authorities.
- They are accused of disturbing the peace and advocating practices illegal for Romans.
- Their activities are tied to their being Jewish, a harbinger of Anti-Semitism to come.
- They are attacked by a crowd who are stirred up by these accusations.
- The magistrates order Paul and Silas stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods
- They are thrown into the innermost cell in prison and their feet are put into stocks.

One would think that the initial glow of resurrection and the drama of Ascension and Pentecost might be quenched given the brutality they faced. But it is not.

- Throughout the night, they pray and sing hymns in their cell.
- Other prisoners listen to them, apparently neither threatening them nor banging on steel bars in anger.
- An earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison.
- Its doors swing open and everyone's chains are unfastened.
- The jailer draws his sword to take his own life.
- But Paul shouts: "Don't do it; we are all here."
- The jailer converts to the faith out of which Paul and Silas are singing; he takes them to his home, cleans their wounds, sets food before them.
- He and he and his family are baptized.
- The magistrate orders Paul and Silas quietly released.
- But Paul and Silas refuse: they want the citizens to know how they – as fellow Roman citizens – have been treated.
- The magistrates apologize.
- Paul and Silas then agree to leave and return to the home of Lydia, who has been housing and nurturing Christians during these early days of the movement.
- Paul and Silas then depart the city.

As we watch these two confront the demonic, endure persecution, sing the faith, refuse to leave jail and demand accountability for authorities, we cannot help but ask: “How did they do it? What is the source of their courage?”

## II.

Some of you may have seen a recent op-ed in the *New York Times* by economist Peter Coy. It has an eye-catching title: “Courage Seemed to Be Dead. Then Came Zelensky.”<sup>6</sup>

Coy traces the decline of courage from Aristotle through contemporary evolutionary biology.

- He praises Aristotle’s view of courage as a *middle ground* between *rashness* and *cowardice*, so long as the middle ground serves a worthy cause.
- Yet as the modern world developed over centuries, Coy sees a rise of selfishness:
  - As *utilitarianism* reigned supreme, a courageous act was deemed wasteful unless it resulted in the “greatest good for the greatest number.”
  - A century later, Adam Smith, saw the driver of human history to be *individual self-interest*. “It is not from the *benevolence* of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner [Smith wrote], but from *their regard* of their *own interest*.” It follows that in pursuing our own interest, there is little room for courage, unless it benefits us directly.
  - A hundred years later, the nail seemed firmly driven into the coffin of *self-sacrificing* courage by Darwin’s widely accepted view that “survival of the fittest” applies not just to animals, but to *people* as well.
  - Today’s version of this is Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene*, in which the evolutionary biologist writes: “Any altruistic system is inherently *unstable*, because it is open to abuse by *selfish* individuals...”

Surveying Western intellectual history, Coy concludes: “Courage became a *relic* of an age of chivalry.” It is now every man, every woman, even every child, for himself, for herself.

\*\*

Yet...

- Adam Smith wrote eloquently concerning how free markets need an ethical basis.
- Darwin saw that part of what allowed *tribes* to survive was when some of their members *fought for one another*, sacrificed for *the good of the tribe*.
- And others have granted that *if* there is a *biological* source to courage, it is *reinforced* by heroic examples of people like Zelensky.

---

<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times*, May 13, 2022.

What Coy describes as the *death of courage* may be more *the rise of a belief* that whatever we do rests on *our own choice*. In the decisions, choices, commitments we make, *we* are the source of whatever courage we display. Whatever courage we have comes from *within us*, when we decide to fight, to sacrifice, to risk even our lives.

### III.

Alongside the sometimes *admirable*, sometimes *heinous* history of Western Civilization, the Christian faith has travelled a somewhat *different* path concerning the *source* of courage. While I as a Christian do not want to claim that the *only* source of courage is faith, I do want to say that as Christians, we do not see courage as coming primarily from the *human* heart, the *human* mind, the *human* will. Those of us whose lives have been captured by faith know that courage is not so much a *choice* we make as a *gift* we have been given, a *calling* that becomes our *compulsion*.

\*\*

When we read the story of Paul and Silas, as when we read many Biblical stories, we are moved to ask: “Could their courage have come from anywhere other than from their *faith*?”

I believe the source of their courage was God. They could no more walk away from their faith than an artist from a canvas, a chef from a kitchen, a parent from a child safe in a crib or trapped in a deadly classroom. Their courage is part of their faith. It is part of who they are. It has been given them like “the color of their eyes or the cut of their jaw.”<sup>7</sup> They can no more walk away from it than a dog can walk away from the marrow inside a bone that has appeared nearby.

\*\*

I do not hold myself up as a model of courage like that of Paul and Silas, like that of those we remember this Memorial Day Weekend. But I know when I was a teenager and young adult, there was a series of losses I experienced and suffering I faced over several years. Thoughts of those losses and that suffering rarely took leave from my mind. I often felt I had no one to turn to, no one with whom I could share what I was going through, which only made it worse.

During this time, I remember being once asked: “What does your faith give you above all else?” And what came out of my mouth without pause or reflection was the word “*perspective*.” The *perspective* I had through the *losses* and *quiet suffering* came in the form of a few sentences I kept repeating to myself – even and especially at the most acute moments – “This will not last forever. You are going to survive this. God will get you through this and out of this.” Whatever courage I had was not my own doing; it was a gift and demand of God.

That is why one of the most important passages of scripture for me is Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

---

<sup>7</sup> This paraphrases Frederick Buechner.

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

...

...darkness is not dark to you...

...for darkness is as light to you...

...all the days...were formed for me  
when none of them yet existed.

- That is the *perspective* I had.
- That is the *perspective* God gave me.
- That is the *perspective* that constituted my faith.
- It is *not* something I developed or chose or discovered or sought or found.
- It came from *beyond me*.
- It came from *God*.

\*\*

As the years have passed and my professional knowledge of the scriptures and theology have grown, I have become more aware of *how* God provides that perspective.

I now understand that not only will God *be with us* “when we make [our] bed in Sheol,” but God *has been through* such suffering and loss in God’s own self. I understand now that God *entered the life of suffering and loss*, that God *suffered* horribly, *died* hideously, *rose* strongly and powerfully. I understand that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “God defeated the enemy [of Sin and Death] from *inside* human nature.”<sup>8</sup>

When Paul and Silas face the torturer’s whip and sing hymns in a darkened prison cell, it is God’s victory that gives them courage. It is God’s defeat of the powers of Sin and Death – through the death and resurrection of Christ – that enable Paul and Silas to act with courage *in their own day and time* within *the same human history* Christ came to *rectify*. That is the faith, the call, the commission, the command, the compulsion God gave them. *That is the source* of their courage.

#### IV.

Peter Coy ends his article by quoting a colleague:

...it’s no coincidence that Zelensky was a *comic actor* before he became President. “Being a leader is *playing a role*,” [the colleague had said]. “A *role dedicated to others*.”

That sounds a bit *understated* for the courage we have seen from Zelensky. But it leads me to conclude with this:

If being a person of courage involves *playing a role*,  
Even a role *dedicated to others*,

---

<sup>8</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015). See pages 567-70, particularly 567n70.

Then that role appears in a drama  
That has been written and choreographed by God,  
Played out on a stage that God has designed and constructed  
at the outset.  
Once it turned aside from its original beauty,  
Its walls deteriorated,  
The boards on its stage loosening,  
Its actors forgetting their lines  
Or reciting them with listlessness or even lies and cruelty,  
God has acted to rectify the drama from within,  
Through the death and resurrection of Christ.  
That death and resurrection is the ultimate source  
Of any courage we have or need.

In these dark and deadly times,  
In which children can no longer go to school without fear,  
May our elected and appointed leaders  
Be given the courage  
That falls between *rashness* and *cowardice*,  
That involves seeking *the greatest good for the greatest number*,  
And may we as citizens, as voters, as Christians  
Play our respective parts to join them,  
So that the child I saw  
Twirling around his father's legs  
As I stood looking down from the top of the escalator at Safeway  
Can go to school with the same sense  
Of joyful trust  
Most of us were able to do.

Amen.