

7.15.07

Courage That Overcomes Our Fear

2 Timothy 1:1-7

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In the New Testament there are books and letters written for a church or churches to be read publicly in worship like 1 Thessalonians and Revelation. There are also a few personal letters intended for an individual. 2 Timothy is probably the last letter Paul wrote before his martyrdom and it is the most intensely personal. What is most personal is often what is most universal so we turn to these words from Paul to Timothy listening also for God's word to us.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, **my beloved child:**

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when **I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.**

Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of **your sincere faith**, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; **for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.**" 2 Timothy 1:1-7

Can you imagine the emotions washing over Timothy as he received this letter? Timothy was the product of a cross cultural marriage between his Jewish mother and Greek father. He seems to have been raised primarily by his faithful and devoted mother and grandmother. Fortunately for Timothy, Paul became a strong male role model who regarded Timothy affectionately as his own beloved child. Timothy certainly must have looked to his older mentor as a kind of father figure. While some men have difficulty or are unwilling to share their emotions and affection freely, Paul and Timothy could.

What a difference it makes when parents freely and openly share their love, affection, and faith with their children. What an impact each of can have when we share our faith, love, and affection freely with our family and friends.

Paul and Timothy are real men, courageous men, able to withstand beatings, imprisonment, riots, and shipwrecks that would have broken or killed most people. But when they parted company for the final time after working together as missionaries, church planters, and pastors – tears flowed freely.

Now sitting on death row, waiting to be executed, Paul writes to give Timothy courage and hope to take away his fear. You might think it would be the other way around – that the person outside of prison, the person not facing death, would write to encourage the one whose end is near - and perhaps Timothy did but his words have not survived. But Paul's faith, confidence, and courage enable him to share words that inspire Timothy to action.

. Like Paul, Shakespeare's King Henry V, in France on the morning of the battle of Agincourt, is facing what seems like almost certain death. Exhausted and vastly outnumbered, Henry and his men face a daunting challenge that causes Henry's cousin to wish they had more men. Henry responds with a stirring speech that inspires the courage of his men to overcome their fear.

Let's listen.

Video Clip from Henry the V, 1989 directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh

Norman Vincent Peale wrote,

*“What words they are: hope, courage, fear! Two of them make life wonderful. One of them blights human existence. How many people have we seen across the years who have suffered from unresolved fear. But, then, also how many have found release and relief through hope and courage.*

*All three of these are mental attitudes that result from the thoughts we think.*

*The mental climate a person creates determines whether he shall have hope even when things seem hopeless, have courage even when apprehensive factors appear, or live in fear because of hopelessness and apprehension.*

*Fear is only the second most powerful force in the personality.*

*One is stronger, very much stronger.*

*And that more powerful force is faith.”<sup>1</sup>*

While King Henry was trying to rouse his men's courage for the sake of a battle that was about power, wealth, and the honor of the king, Paul was seeking to rouse Timothy's courage for “the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,” for grace, mercy and peace.

Courage and hope that banish fear grow out of faith and prayer. One man (Fulton Oursler) said, *“We are prey to our fears unless we can pray our fears away.”* Paul assures Timothy that he is praying for him night and day. Wouldn't you be encouraged knowing someone was praying for you night and day? As Marilyn Ratz and her family

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, Treasury of Courage and Confidence, pages 95-96.

have been going through the frightening health ordeal that her daughter Kate has been facing down in Georgia, she has written via email and expressed to me and others how much they have appreciated the prayers that have gone up night and day from Africa, Europe, and North America on Kate's behalf.

It may sound strange but I can often tell when people are praying for me or not. Perhaps some of you have had a similar experience.

Who are you praying for like Paul prayed for Timothy – who are you asking God to give courage and hope night and day? Many of us can begin by praying this way for ourselves – that the Lord will give us courage and hope in the face of our fears. While there is a mystery to both answered and unanswered prayer, I believe that prayer can powerfully impact our selves as well as people who are physically far away from us.

Paul seeks to encourage Timothy by assuring him of his love and prayers and by reminding him of the gift of God's Spirit that has been given to him. Timothy is a young man with the daunting responsibility of faithfully leading, pastoring, teaching, and training churches and individuals in the midst of a highly pluralistic and resistant culture. It is understandable that he is feeling timid and fearful especially knowing that Paul is no longer with him and is facing death and perhaps wondering if the same fate awaits him. Many of us are timid and fearful when it comes to sharing our faith or praying with other people in conditions that are far less threatening or intimidating than those faced by Timothy.

Paul reminds Timothy that **God has given him and given to all who claim the name of Jesus, a spirit of power, love, and self discipline.** Power, love, and self discipline are complementary. Power needs to be directed, guided, and shaped by love and self-discipline and a sound mind. Power that is lacking love and self-discipline is dangerous and destructive, whether in marriages or families or in our larger society. Love which lacks power is ineffective and may not stand in the inevitable storms of life. Love that is empowered but lacking self-discipline, self-control, or a sound mind may be wild, undisciplined, and harmful.

God gives us a spirit of power, love, and self-control because God doesn't want us held back by fear.

In the 1991 film comedy *Defending Your Life* Albert Brooks character, Daniel Miller is *"a quality human being still held back by the fears which have plagued him lifetime after lifetime."* After dying, he and Meryl Streep visit the Past Lives Pavilion, which is introduced by Shirley MacLain. There Streep learns in a past life, that she was

Prince Valiant. Brooks sees himself in a past life running, eyes wide with fear, yelling, “Tiger! Tiger!”

“Who were you?” she asks. “Dinner.”

God doesn’t want us held back by fear. Paul wanted Timothy to be courageous and hopeful serving Jesus with power disciplined by love. Both men knew this was their last communication. This was Paul’s final opportunity to give Timothy what he needed to pass on the Christian life to future generations.

Every Paul needs a Timothy into whom he can pour his life and wisdom.

Every Timothy needs a Paul, mentoring and providing encouragement.

Every Timothy needs a Lois and Eunice, modeling love and faith, and teaching the essentials of the Christian spiritual life.

**If we will stir up the gift of God that has been given to us, each of us can be a Paul, a Timothy, a Lois or Eunice.** We can be a mentor and source of encouragement. We are role models to others of what Christian love and faith look like. We can teach others the essentials of the Christian faith.

Pope John Paul II wrote, “*Like Mary, you must not be afraid to allow the Holy Spirit to help you become intimate friends of Christ.*

*Like Mary, you must put aside any fear, in order to take Christ to the world in whatever you do. Christ wants to go to many places in the world and enter many hearts through you.”* As the Apostle Paul and many other anonymous Christians have proved through the centuries, this can happen even from prison.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian, whose courage and faith in standing against the Nazi’s and Adolph Hitler led him to prison and finally, the concentration camp at Flossenbergr where he was executed on April 9, 1945 just a few weeks before World War II ended in Europe.

In a letter written August 21, 1944 to Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrote words strikingly similar to those Paul wrote Timothy. “We are often told in the New Testament to ‘be strong’ (1 Corinthians 16.13; Ephesians 6.10; 2 Timothy 2.1; 1 John 2.14). Isn’t people’s weakness (stupidity, lack of independence, forgetfulness, cowardice, vanity, corruptibility, temptability, etc.) a greater danger than evil? **Christ not only makes people ‘good’; he makes them strong too.**

The sins of weakness are the real human sins. I must think about this again. Good-bye; keep well, and don't lose confidence."<sup>2</sup>

What I understand to be the last poem Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that survived the war is a final example of how courage helps to overcome our fear. Written in the concentration camp as 1944 turned into 1945, a few months before his martyrdom, it is called, POWERS OF GOOD

With every power of good to stay and guide me,  
Comforted and inspired beyond all fear.  
I'll live these days with you in thought beside me,  
and pass with you, into the coming year.

The old year still torments our hearts, unhastening;  
The long days of our sorrow still endure;  
Father, grant to the souls thou hast been chastening  
That thou hast promised, the healing and the cure.

Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving  
even to the dregs of pain, *at thy command,*  
*we will not falter,* thankfully receiving  
all that is given by thy loving hand.

But should it be thy will once more to release us  
to life's enjoyment and its good sunshine,  
*that which we've learned from sorrow shall increase us,*  
and all our life be dedicate as thine.

Today let candles shed their radiant greeting;  
lo, on our darkness are they not thy light  
leading us haply, to our longed for meeting? –  
Thou canst illumine even our darkest night.

When now the silence deepens for our hearkening,

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison, page 392.

grant that we may hear thy children's voices raise  
from all the unseen world around us darkening  
their universal paeon (pee' en), in thy praise.

While all the powers of good aid and attend us,  
**boldly we'll face the future, come what may.**  
At even and at morn God will befriend us,  
and oh, most surely on each new day!<sup>3</sup>

The fire of faith and courage must be fed regularly or it may be extinguished. This week I hope each of us like Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, will seek to share with others through a letter, a message, or a conversation in a way that will give them courage, hope, and faith. May your prayers and encouragement be used by God to help someone overcome their fear.

**Prayer:**

"Lord, we pray not for tranquility, nor that our tribulations may cease; we pray for your spirit and your love, that you grant us strength and grace to overcome adversity, through Jesus Christ. Amen" (Girolamo Savonarola, 15<sup>th</sup> Century)

**Blessing:**

Comforted and inspired beyond all fear,  
Not faltering at God's command,  
Learning and increasing from our sorrow  
God's light illuminating our darkness  
Let us boldly and courageously face the future, come what may.

**A few words of Scripture:**

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.  
Wait for the Lord; be strong; and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!  
For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison, pages 400-401.

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.

Let all that you do be done in love.”

Joshua 1:9, Psalm 27:4, 2 Timothy 1:7, 1 Corinthians 16:13