

Courage

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a seven-week series

January 19, 2020

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1 Samuel 25:9–25 (CEB)

[Hiding out from the king, David's men seek help from Nabal, whose shepherds and flocks have been protected by David's band of rebels.]

⁹ When David's young men arrived, they said all this to Nabal on David's behalf. Then they waited. ¹⁰ But Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is Jesse's son? There are all sorts of slaves running away from their masters these days. ¹¹ Why should I take my bread, my water, and the meat I've butchered for my shearers and give it to people who came here from who knows where?" ¹² So David's young servants turned around and went back the way they came. When they arrived, they reported every word of this to David.

¹³ Then David said to his soldiers, "All of you, strap on your swords!" So each of them strapped on their swords, and David did the same. Nearly four hundred men went up with David. Two hundred men remained back with the supplies.

¹⁴ One of Nabal's servants told his wife Abigail, "David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, but he just yelled at them. ¹⁵ But the men were very good to us and didn't mistreat us. Nothing of ours went missing the whole time we were out with them in the fields. ¹⁶ In fact, the whole time we were with them, watching our sheep, they were a protective wall around us both night and day. ¹⁷ Think about that and see what you can do, because trouble is coming for our master and his whole household. But he's such a despicable person no one can speak to him."

¹⁸ Abigail quickly took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep ready for cooking, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred raisin cakes, and two hundred fig cakes. She loaded all this on donkeys ¹⁹ and told her servants, "Go on ahead of me. I'll be right behind you." But she didn't tell her husband Nabal.

²⁰ As she was riding her donkey, going down a trail on the hillside, David and his soldiers appeared, descending toward her, and she met up with them. ²¹ David had just been saying, "What a waste of time—guarding all this man's stuff in the wilderness so that nothing of his went missing! He has repaid me evil instead of good! ²² May God deal harshly with me, David, and worse still if I leave alive even one single one who urinates on a wall belonging to him come morning!"

²³ When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and fell facedown before him, bowing low to the ground. ²⁴ She fell at his feet and said, "Put the blame on me, my master! But please let me, your servant, speak to you directly. Please listen to what your servant has to say. ²⁵ Please, my master, pay no attention to this despicable man Nabal. He's exactly what his name says he is! His name means fool, and he is foolish! But I myself, your servant, didn't see the young men that you, my master, sent.

Becoming courageous is about learning to face difficulties well.

Last week, we began this series on the virtues, i.e., good moral habits. Classically, any consideration of the virtues begins with Aristotle's four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. And, as we saw, these four begin with Wisdom, for it is the only "knowing" virtue, sometimes described as the "charioteer" of the virtues. The virtue "wisdom," or more precisely, "prudence," is practical knowledge, it is knowing the right goal/end and the right means to accomplish it.

This week, we turn to courage, or as it is sometimes called, fortitude. In her recent book, *Reading Well*, Karen Swallow Prior helps us understand what we mean by courage.

The word courage comes from the same root word that means "heart." To be encouraged is to be heartened or made stronger. When we exhort a person to "take heart," we mean for her to stand strong and be of good courage. It is noteworthy, too,

that we use the word heart to signify our desires and passions. When someone says she has “a heart for the poor,” for example, it means she has a passion for the good of poor people. When the Bible says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21), the word heart, likewise, suggests passion and desire. It might seem hard at first to see the connection between courage and desire, but courage, ultimately, demonstrates that one’s desires have been rightly ordered to put first things first—even to the point of laying down one’s life for something of even greater value. The person who enters a burning building to rescue a child inside values that child’s life more than his own. We can see similarly proper ordering even with more mundane acts of courage. A person’s great desire to avoid fumbling for words in front of people might be surpassed by her love for the newlywed couple to whom she wishes to offer a toast. One of the most courageous people I know simply got herself out of bed and to work every day (well, almost every day) after her new marriage came to a devastating end, and she would have preferred simply to die rather than go on from day to day. Courage requires putting a greater good before a lesser good. Courage is getting your heart in the right place at the right time despite the obstacles.¹

Is it possible to have what seems like too much courage or too little? Sure. Think of two teenagers in fast cars racing towards one another in a potentially deadly game of chicken. Are the two young men courageous or simply foolhardy? Are they putting a greater good before a lesser good? Of course not! They are putting winning the game above their own lives. This isn’t courageous, but rash and foolish, undervaluing the life that God has given them. The wise choice, the prudent decision, would be to walk away from the game. If you are going to put your life at risk, make sure it is for a greater good.

Cowardice, a lack of courage, is also a mis-valuing. The person who refuses to enter a burning building to save a child’s life values his own life more highly than the child’s. Wisdom, the foundational virtue, is what enables us to make such judgments rightly. You can imagine that there has been much disagreement about how best to make those judgments, which brings us to the relationship between courage and justice. St. Ambrose said that “Fortitude without justice is a lever of evil,” meaning that bravery in pursuit of injustice is not true fortitude as it is in pursuit of the wrong goals. Think of it this way, true courage is praise-worthy, which means that the goal must also be praise-worthy, such as saving a child’s life.

So, courage is the mean between two vices, foolhardiness and cowardice. Finding this mean, i.e., developing the habit of courage, is about learning to face difficulties well. There are two parts to courage: *attack* and *endurance*. In his book, *Moral Theology*, William Matteson reflects on both²

The following example of both attack and endurance should help further illuminate both parts [and] demonstrate the primacy of endurance . . . Consider a patient diagnosed with life-threatening cancer. This is clearly an occasion for fortitude, since he faces a great difficulty and has the opportunity to suffer this hardship well or poorly. He is vulnerable and has something to lose. His health and chance of survival depend in no small part on how he will respond to his diagnosis, so how he acts does indeed matter.

He is quite afraid, but he does not let it debilitate him. With the help of others, he prudently understands his situation accurately and makes good decisions. The patient begins by learning all about his disease in order to fight it as best he can. This is a classic example of *attack*. The cancer threatens his life and he seeks to eliminate that threat. He educates himself, exercises, eats well, and receives treatment. Of course, at moments when he is not reading, exercising, or seeing doctors he must *endure*.

¹ Swallow Prior, Karen. On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books . Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Mattison III, William C. Introducing Moral Theology (pp. 188-189). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Though the ultimate injury, death, may be avoidable, in a very real sense suffering is already present. In the quiet moments especially, he must endure and not let his spirit be crushed. Thus, bravery in this situation requires acts of both attack and endurance. Eventually, however, it may become clear that though he has fought the good fight, the cancer has significantly advanced to the terminal stage and will soon take his life. Further treatment will no longer help. The time for attack has passed. And yet endurance remains.

We sometimes speak of the terminally ill being brave in their facing of death, and this seems odd given the more militant models of fortitude that are forefront on our minds. But the story of this patient perfectly reveals how fortitude is not only for soldiers, and why Aquinas is correct that endurance is the primary part of fortitude. The patient bravely faces his impending death. Perhaps there is strengthening of family bonds or needed reconciliation. There may be spiritual and/or sacramental preparation. There is certainly a refusal to let the impending enemy of death destroy what goods in life there are still available. Eventually the person passes from this life having exemplified fortitude to the end. A helpful way to end this . . . is with the famous Serenity Prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous:

God, grant me
The serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can, and
Wisdom to know the difference.

A Story of Courage

There are numerous examples of biblical characters who exhibit the virtue of fortitude and some who don't. One of my favorites is the story of Abigail in 1 Samuel 25. It goes like this.

David is on the run from the mad king, Saul, and has been hiding in the wilderness areas south of Jerusalem. He has a band of fellow rebels numbering 600 or more and all of them are living off the land and the kindness of sympathetic Israelites. He learns of a rich man named Nabal (which means "fool") and asks for help, noting that David's men have protected Nabal's men and flocks in the wild. Nabal, ever the fool, decides to ignore David's request and insults him to boot. When David learns of this, he decides that the only proper course for him and his men is to strap on their swords and head out for a fight.

Word of all this reaches Abigail, Nabal's wife, who decides that *attack* is the only way to deal with this crisis. So, she assembles a huge store of food and heads out to intercept David. She meets him in a ravine and confronts him with the truth – David is going to shed blood over an insult. She acknowledges her husband's foolishness and begs for mercy. And David relents, knowing that Abigail has saved him from his own temper. David had acted rashly and unwisely – without virtue; Abigail, in contrast, showed true courage and wisdom, which peacemaking offer requires in large measure. Bruce Birch comments:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God" (Matt 5:9 NRSV). Peacemaking and acting as a partner in God's family are allied in this saying of Jesus. Abigail models it. David is reminded of it by Abigail on the verge of violating the peace, and he sees God's action in Abigail (1 Sam 25:32, 39). To do good rather than evil is to align our actions with what God is doing. To be peacemakers is to seek the unity of human moral agency with divine agency

Peace in the Hebrew sense of *šālôm* means wholeness and well-being. . . . In our own time, it is often easier to confront great forces of obvious evil (Hitlers and Stalins, KKK and Bull Connors, apartheid and ethnic cleansing) than to confront our own mean-spirited foolishness and the evil that results. It is easy to desire peacemaking and turning from vengeance as the work of diplomats and Nobel prize winners. It is more difficult to rush, like Abigail, into the breaches of daily

life where foolishness provokes violence and standing between the two is risky business.³

When Nabal hears what Abigail has done, he collapses and dies soon afterward. And David then took Abigail for his wife. A fitting ending.

Daily Bible Readings

More stories of courage. What do these stories have in common?

Monday, Genesis 12:1-9 Abram and Sarai leave their home for lands unknown. Courageous or foolhardy?

Tuesday, Judges 7 Gideon attacks with only three hundred men. Courageous or foolhardy?

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 17 David and Goliath. Courageous or foolhardy?

Thursday, Daniel 3 Daniel's friends refuse the king's orders. Courageous or foolhardy?

Friday, John 18:28-38a. Jesus refused to defend himself before Pilate. Courageous or foolhardy?

Saturday, Acts 21:1-16 Paul heads for Jerusalem despite knowing that he will be arrested, Courageous or foolhardy?

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of the book of Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Coming soon: The gospel of Matthew

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Paul's letter to the Romans

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle."

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning this week, Jan 12: *The Real Story of the Crusades*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy

³ Bruce C. Birch, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 2, 1170–1171.