

The Path to Courage

The midwives, however . . . (Exodus 15:17).

Scripture: Exodus 1:15-22

Song: “Find Us Faithful”

In the early church, Christians faced the choice of pledging their allegiance to the Roman emperor or defying him and declaring that God alone was their Lord. Centuries earlier, the Hebrew midwives in Egypt faced the same challenge when commanded to destroy newborn boys among their own enslaved people.

Faithfulness to what is right becomes an issue in many settings. Among the most tense are those when injustice is demanded by the laws of the land, with severe penalties if those laws are disobeyed. With the advantage of hindsight, we admire courageous faithfulness to what is right in life-threatening situations. We hope we would be as faithful, and perhaps we also hope we will not be tested to find out.

Jesus explained that such courage is forged in the day-to-day decisions (Luke 16:10). Books are not written about these. This faithfulness is not to be confused with stubborn dedication to our own ways and ideas. It is faithfulness based on a biblically informed conscience (1 Peter 3:16) and a healthy fear (1:15-17). That means it is a faithfulness that has a reputation of respect for authority (Romans 13:1-6), while also having a confidence that can face an authority gone bad (Matthew 10:28).

Holy Father, today may we be faithful to You and ready to be true when wrong is expected from us. In Jesus' name, amen.

December 14–20. **Harold Comings** is a retired senior pastor who lives with his wife, Judy, in Florida.

Self-Confidence

“I [Solomon] am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties” (1 Kings 3:7).

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:5-14

Song: “Come, Thou Fount”

Bunyan, in *The Holy War*, created the story of man as a great castle. He gave it five gates (Eye Gate, Ear Gate, etc.), and he populated it with such characters as Lord Will, Lord Mind, and Captain Innocence. The narrative includes the surrender of the city to Diabolus; the winning back of the city by the Prince; and the spiritual failure of the city through the deceit of one of its new citizens, Mr. Carnal Security. This fellow represented the danger of experience.

Solomon recognized the vulnerability of youth and inexperience. Therefore, with remarkable faith, he replied to God’s blank-check offer by requesting wisdom; and in the early years of his reign, he was a celebrity of sound judgment. However, as wisdom became “routine,” Solomon took on a false sense of security. He could be “wise” in his own eyes without being spiritual. This resulted in bad judgments and in discontent among his people. He became a rather cynical old man (Ecclesiastes 12:8), whose one lingering shred of wisdom lay in the fact that he knew where he’d gotten off track (v. 1).

Life experience, with a sense of our own expertise and sufficiency, can replace awareness of our vulnerability. We must guard our hearts against a self-confidence that prevents us from remembering our need for God, which we felt in the first days of our walk with Jesus.

Father, help me to remember that there are no learned skills that replace my need to trust You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Sometimes Paradoxes

God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel (Daniel 1:9).

Scripture: Daniel 1:8-17

Song: “If We Are the Body”

December 20, 1943. American pilot Charles Brown, flying his badly damaged bomber across Germany, had lost hope of reaching safety. Then a German fighter came alongside. Twice the German signaled him to land and surrender. Brown refused. The German flew alongside until they were over the North Sea. Then he simply saluted and turned back. In a paradox of wartime, the enemy had escorted the vulnerable American to open space, where he could fly safely to England.

Brokenness and defeat are such a part of our lives in this dangerous world that we sometimes don't know our enemies from our friends. In fact, sometimes they may even seem to change places. The account of Daniel presents a double paradox. Snatched from his home, he and three friends were carried to the center of enemy territory to serve the hostile government that had kidnapped them. However, among the enemies God prepared a caretaker willing to assume personal risk by respecting the consciences of the young captives. In the end, God honored the caretaker and shielded him by giving success to the boys' plan.

If we put these accounts next to Jesus' story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), we realize that the God who assigns us the paradox of loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44) wants us to be willing to accept the paradox of being blessed by them if He so arranges.

Father, Your ways are mysterious. Help me accept that mystery and trust You. In Jesus' name, amen.

The One to Beat

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

Scripture: Galatians 3:25-29

Song: "My Soul, Be on Thy Guard"

The disappearance of 12-year-old Edward V of England and his 9-year-old brother, Richard, is an unsolved mystery. Their uncle and guardian, Richard of Gloucester (who became King Richard III), remains the prime suspect, but there are several other viable theories.

History knows no lack of narratives about vulnerable heirs to power and privilege, of whom Adam would be the first. The Old Testament frequently describes Satan's efforts to thwart the arrival of Jesus. Some of those are in a context of intrigues against potential successors to the throne of Judah (such as 2 Kings 11:1-3). In the parable of a conflict between the owner of a vineyard and the men he hired to care for it (Luke 20:9-16), Jesus exposed the conspiracy of the religious leaders against Him.

The danger of heirship should not be overlooked when we who trust Jesus are described as "heirs." The designation involves more than future status. It involves present purpose and vulnerability. Those who surrender to Christ's kingdom come under attack. We understand the real need of good armor (Ephesians 6:10-18). Satan targets Jesus' heirs with an agenda greater than simply getting us to sin. He wants to make us spectacles of reproach and to neutralize us as representatives of the kingdom to which we belong.

Father, thank You for making us heirs of Your kingdom. May we be found faithful and on guard in the responsibilities that such a privilege implies. In Jesus' name, amen.

Jesus Is No Superhero

“Bethlehem Ephrathah, . . . out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel” (Micah 5:2).

Scripture: Micah 5:1-5

Song: “O Worship the King”

Ever since Mandrake the Magician appeared as “comics’ first superhero” in 1934, it seems people need a superhero. As a general rule, each of the new champions who have come on the scene share common features: a human link to the rest of us, a unique capability, but also a neutralizing vulnerability.

Some might want to list Jesus among such superheroes. After all, He was linked to us, He was a capable miracle worker, and perhaps His weakness was an idealism that caused Him to not assert himself.

The apostle John helps us with this. He makes it clear that God actually became one of us. The God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, demonstrated power over mankind, disease, spirits, matter, and nature. With the raising of Lazarus (John 11), we see that Jesus was fully in charge of the long-ago-planned giving of himself for the sins of sinners. Undistracted through the unfolding events, He confronted every situation head-on. He only died to accomplish His purpose (John 19:30) and then was raised to life forevermore (10:18).

Jesus is no flawed superhero struggling against the tsunami of world events. He was, is, and will remain the overseeing and overruling Sovereign of the cosmos (Revelation 1:8), who conquered death and lives to give life to those who trust Him.

Father, thank You for not giving us just another “superhero” but Your Son—the Sovereign King of kings and Lord of my soul. In His name, amen.

Selling Ourselves

He would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23).

Scripture: Matthew 2:19-23

Song: “Not I, but Christ”

For a while, I enjoyed the generosity of a member of the church I served. Then a deacon explained that anything this man did for his pastor became a topic of personal “testimony” in his Sunday school class and the community. That was disappointing; but it made me wonder whether I go to lengths to make sure my name gets attached to my ministry?

Although they can overlap, there is a difference in selling oneself (which can include propaganda) and presenting oneself (which has to do with availability and authentic performance for service). Jesus did not “sell” himself, even though being known as a Nazarene was a handicap (John 1:46). The great miracles of His birth were shrouded in a paradoxical privacy. He let His words and His works speak for themselves, and He didn’t waste time with “damage control” when they were misinterpreted and misrepresented. When the multitudes grew bored and walked away, Jesus let them go! (John 6:60-66).

As we represent Jesus in our world, we have been called to promote Him through our personal availability to Him. Letting our light shine is not a matter of getting our name in lights. Our privilege is to draw attention to God, not ourselves. If God wants us to share in the “credits,” He knows how to do that through mouths other than our own (Proverbs 27:2).

Dear Father, help us to be so busy presenting You that we don’t have time to make sure that our efforts promote our own names. In Jesus’ name, amen.

A Theology of Vulnerability

“Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matthew 2:15).

Scripture: Matthew 2:7-15

Song: “Jesus Shall Reign”

At age 19, Pete Sampras became the youngest winner of the Men’s US Open Tennis Championship. That victory made him the man to beat. The higher the profile, the greater the vulnerability.

With the new, higher profile of Joseph and his small family, this triumph involved months on the run. His actions and the testimony of others in Scripture indicate that vulnerability comes with following God’s will. Therefore, every believer needs a theology of vulnerability.

The psalmist put vulnerability in its proper place when he wrote, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). “Fearfully” and “wonderfully” are not synonyms. The writer expressed to God his recognition that, although his body was a wonderful testimony of God’s creative wisdom, this wonderful created body is also scary. Then he put both “wonderful” and “scary” into one category. He called them “marvellous” (v. 14, *KJV*).

While vulnerability implies danger, it also implies design. Even before man’s rebellion he was vulnerable. Back then he faced only one danger—the danger of not recognizing his vulnerability. Today we are painfully aware of our vulnerability to many dangers. Yet it is our awareness of danger, and our recognition of our need for a strategy, that lies at the heart of our faith. Humbly we confess our need for God to stand with us, and for us, as He was with Joseph from Bethlehem to Nazareth.

Father, help me see my vulnerabilities as part of a marvelous package through which You work in my life. In Jesus’ name, amen.