

## **Power Made Perfect in Weakness:**

### **Reflections on Vulnerability and the Virtue of Courage**

*“But [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you,  
for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”*

*--The Apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:9*

In the last few months of the year 2001, the virtue of courage made the headlines. This time, it was not Hollywood-style heroism that was honored (however much the news broadcasters portrayed it that way). After the recent tragedies in our country, we had a taste of something different—something much more difficult. The courage that we saw in New York and are learning now requires living face to face with suffering, pain, and even death.

Courage is probably one of the most familiar virtues to us; lessons in courage are everywhere, in the adventures of the latest and greatest action-adventure hero or in the valiant efforts of our favorite football team. Unlike temperance and chastity, the name of this virtue is part of our everyday vocabulary.

But there is a side of courage which, despite our familiarity with this virtue, we do not think about much—a side that can be revealed in the endurance of great suffering and even death. There is a kind of courage that shows its real character when our vulnerability is greatest and our own power is exhausted. Then, as the apostle Paul puts it, God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness.

In America we value being independent and being able to take care of ourselves. We often treat weakness, vulnerability, and the suffering that accompanies them as evils of the human condition which we should avoid, prevent, and overcome at almost any cost. This is a common reaction to the events of September 11. The suffering caused by the terrorist attacks is indeed a horrific evil; there isn't one of us who doesn't want to rid the world of it. But can we? And what will it cost us?

A Christian view of courage knows that suffering, for all its difficulty, is not the greatest evil. It is worse to do evil than to suffer it. Christian courage also knows that it need not fear weakness; it knows that suffering can be a crucible of self-transformation. It knows this because it understands strength and power in a radically different way.

Becoming virtuous is, put simply, becoming more and more like Christ. This means we have to be transformed; each of us has to become a new person. The transformation requires suffering and the death of our old self, and it required Christ's suffering and death. To understand courage (or any virtue) and how it transforms us, we should look first what the person and life of Christ reveal to us. What does the life and witness of Jesus Christ teach us about true strength?

Jesus Christ teaches us that love can lead us to endure suffering and pain, even death on a cross. If we want a model of courage, we need only look at Christ's life of self-sacrificing, suffering love. This answer is important and worth thinking about precisely because it is a radically different answer than the typical American ideal of

courage. Perhaps it is a model of courage and power and strength which only a Christian can make sense of.

Augustine defines courage as “love bearing all things readily for the sake of the object beloved.” For courage to point beyond itself, for love to “bear all things,” there has to be something worth dying for, someone who is be loved even more than suffering and pain are feared. Courage is not desperate; it is not despairing or suicidal. It is confident that there is something greater to be gained, even at great cost; therefore it is full of hope and rooted in love.

As a virtue, courage is an inner quality; it is spiritual strength. It does not therefore require physical power, or military might, or the ability to overcome another person with force. This conception of courage stands in stark contrast with the classic American hero, who through his own strength and cunning manages to escape desperate situations, overcome the bad guys, and win the day. It is also characteristically American that the hero wins the day totally on his own, without any help from anyone else. This is *Die Hard* heroism, and we love it.

But if we back up from heroic fiction to real life, we realize that the Bruce Willis model of courage doesn't tell us what to do when our own strength, physical or spiritual, isn't enough to win the day. What if we fight to protect ourselves with all the strength we've got, and find ourselves still vulnerable? For the last few months we as a nation, and as individual Christians, have had these questions ringing in our ears.

Courage is necessary precisely because we are vulnerable to harm, because bodily pain and suffering are a very real part of human life here on earth. This is the way it is

for us. New York wrote that truth larger than life for us, in smoke and screams we could not conveniently ignore. But after Eden it has always been true. Courage cannot eliminate every threat; it will never gain for us a guarantee of safety and comfort. Courage can, however, ensure that our fear and suffering don't stop us from doing good. And it can keep fear and threats of suffering from driving us to do evil.

Thinking of courage as the endurance of suffering is a very old idea, even if it is a new thought for some of us. It is also a scary idea. When faced with suffering, our instincts lead us to want to 'do something about it'. A recent survey of terminally ill patients reported that those who wanted the option of physician assisted suicide were more afraid of suffering and pain than they were of death itself. Why is the endurance of suffering so difficult for us? Why does it occasion such intense fear?

Three reasons come to mind—there may well be more. First, we have to suffer and endure when we are attacked or threatened by someone or something stronger than us. Counterattack is an option when we are in a position of superior strength and are willing to use it. When we can 'do something' to counter the threat or pain that means we are still in control. For many of us, that is a much more comfortable place to be.

But courage can also uphold us when we are in a position of weakness, or when we have lost control over our circumstances, or when we cannot or should not use power and force to fight back. Courage can stand firm and stand fast as well as striking out against. This is what the martyrs show us. This is what the cross shows us.

The second reason suffering is hard to face is that when we are able to strike back against things that hurt us, we can use anger to our advantage. Anger is a powerful emotional force that can psyche us up for overcoming a threat against us.

But anger is powerless to help us when we can't fight the pain and make it go away. When we suffer, we bear not only pain and difficulty, but hurt on top of helplessness. Thomas Aquinas once said that "sorrow tends to give way to the thing that hurts." The courage to suffer thus faces threats from inside ourselves, as well as threats to us from outside.

The last reason why the endurance of suffering is so difficult is that endurance implies a long stretch of time when pain or trials must be faced. American culture tells us to expect things to be fixed, and to be fixed immediately. Advertisements begin with the premise that we shouldn't have to put up with pain and that patience is pointless. When our view of the future is colored by impatient expectations rather than suffused with hope, suffering more easily wears us down over the long haul.

But if courage can be revealed in suffering, then it is a virtue for all of us, even those of us who may never count as powerful action-hero-types. If courage is expressed in the endurance of suffering, then it is no longer open only to those who excel in sheer human strength and physical power. In fact, it may be especially available to the weak and the wounded.

Christ shows us, especially in his moment of greatest vulnerability, the source of true strength—the power of the love of God. This is a power that is beyond us, yet which can become our own. What Christ ensures for us in his dying and rising is that there will

be sufficient grace for the journey, and that in the end, all our tears will be wiped away. God's power and promises are reason to take heart. God's love is greater than our greatest fears, even our fear of suffering. And we need it to be, because that love itself sometimes requires us to suffer.

It is tempting to avoid suffering at all costs. It is hard to live with pain and difficulty and not be able to 'do something about it.' It is hard to face our own vulnerability and weakness. It is tempting to trust our own strength; even to return evil for evil. Courage is the strength to resist these temptations, to own up to the limits of our own power and control, to use "all our strength" first and foremost in the service of love, whatever the cost. For courage, in the words of Josef Pieper, is "nothing else than to love [the] good, in the face of injury or death,...undeterred by any spirit of compromise."

When we endure suffering, our helplessness can't be fixed and it can't be ignored. But from that place of hurt and helplessness we see most clearly that courage is not finally about our *own* strength to overcome difficulty. Only God has the power to overcome evil. Only God has faced death down and defeated it. When our own strength is exhausted by suffering, we see most clearly that true strength is rooted in God's power, and inspired by his love.

Real courage is courage that finds its strength in the power of God's love. That love has the power to hold us steadfast in the pain of broken relationships, in the pile of rubble in New York, even in the face of death itself. Christian courage can take heart, for although we must stand fast, we need never stand alone. The God of love has promised us, "I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you....Have I not commanded

you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9).

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