

“Heavenly Virtues - Courage”

1 Samuel 25:9–25

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 people 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 does not necessarily value 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 praiseworthy, which means that the goal must also be praiseworthy, such as saving a child’s life.



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

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 both.²

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*.

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...

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 do not. 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

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

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 offering peace 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?

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