

FACING FEAR

The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution

Anna Hampton

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Facing Fear: The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution
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Chapter 1
When Your Back Is Against the Wall

And given the elusive psychology of courage, it is often the case that the surer knowledge of our cowardice will give us some access to the uncertain knowledge of our courage.[1]
—William Ian Miller

"*You're so courageous! I could never do what you do*!"

I'd frequently hear this statement after sharing at supporting churches about our lives and work in the Middle East. Honestly, I'm sure some of my projected confidence included a sense of adventure that propelled me to jump on planes and travel halfway around the world. But if a sense of adventure is the motivation, can it be courageous? What *is* courage? Do I have enough of it? Must a person be fearless all the time, or sometimes brave and sometimes cowardly?

We want to *seem* courageous to others, so we say things that sound brave to society. Courage, connected to fear and cowardice, is more than being patient and enduring suffering. Is courage defined as a description of deeds, a character trait, or motivation that propels us to act?[2] Or do we need to ask different questions entirely?

Those who are innocent of battle terror speak blithely of fear and courage.[3] Tim O'Brien, a soldier in the Vietnam War, thought deeply about courage and how to explain it. From his experiences on the battlefield and his study of Plato in *Laches*, O'Brien realized that it is hard to precisely identify what courage is.

"It's the charge, the light brigade with only one man, that is the first thing to think about when thinking about courage. People who do it are remembered as brave, win or lose, and are heroes forever. It seems like courage, the charge [but] it's hard to be brave, and it's hard to know what bravery is."[4]

From Aristotle to the Twenty-First Century

Possibly more than any other virtue, the concept of courage has been debated for over two millennia. So much of modern-day thinking about risk, danger, fear, and courage stems back to Plato and Aristotle.

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1 Miller, *Mystery of Courage*, x.
2 Miller, ix, x.
3 Inge, *Tour of Bones*, 6.
4 O'Brien, *If I Die*, 134.

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In his book, *The Mystery of Courage*, Miller describes the shape and style of courage.[5] First, Aristotelian courage belongs only to male warriors ready to die and marching forward to the battlefield; they die in a forward attacking position. Aristotle found no virtue or courage in retreat, and he believed that the person who never struggles with fear is the most virtuous and courageous. Ethical courage (the good) is courage on the battlefield in defense of Greek cities.[6]

Secondly, since the time of the ancient Greeks, courage has implied specific physical characteristics. The man of courage is often represented physically by the youthful, blond Norse male body in Olympic shape. According to Plato, courage is the lynchpin that holds all four main virtues together, so overweight people are never depicted in writings or art as courageous. Assumedly, they are overweight because they lack temperance; therefore, they lack courage.

Thirdly, cowardice also embodies particular features—the skinny, spindly, short guy is rarely depicted as the courageous one. Even moral courage is displayed physically: we "Stand tall," "Stand up," "Stand firm," and "Don't take it lying down."

Finally, the primary picture of courage in Western thought for women is Joan of Arc (also depicted as ethnically white), with her Romanized metal battle attire as she sits on her warhorse. Miller says that "there is no favored body type that is both female and courageous that is not substantially masculinized."[7]

When it comes to courage, a vulnerable female image is rarely used. Consider the fearsome, physical, and spiritually courageous image of the twenty-two-year-old new mother, Perpetua, her breasts dripping with milk, rearranging her hair, disheveled from the bull's attacks (a modest woman's hair should not be down in public), in the middle of the arena in Carthage on the seventh of March, AD 203.[8] She refused to deny Christ even though it meant leaving her baby motherless, guiding the gladiator's sword to her own throat when the bull didn't kill her.

After Aristotle and Plato came the Stoics and Epicureans. Stoic philosophy extended Aristotle's teaching on fear even further, defining fear as an irrational emotion to be repudiated. For the Epicureans, no type of fear was acceptable, even the fear of death.

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5 Miller, *Mystery of Courage*, 185–200.

6 Plato, "Laches."

7 Miller, *Mystery of Courage*, 189.

8 Moore, "Perpetua, An Early Christian."

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When we consider Jesus and our humanity, fear seems so much a part of what it means to be human that to see Jesus as fully human, it's possible to consider him feeling fear. We may even have to see him afraid. In Christ, both human and divine, it is possible to have fear and not sin.

Three of the Gospels mention what sounds like his fear.[9] In Gethsemane: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:39). Scientists explain that when Jesus was sweating drops of blood, he was having a severe physiological response to a dread fear (horror).[10] The cup is his suffering of having the evil, vile sins of the entire history of the world placed upon him, the utter separation from his Father, and the horror of submitting to one of the most painful, shameful, and terrifying deaths[11] known. However, these passages of our Lord's passion threw Origen, an early church father, into a third-century uproar.

Origen denies that Christ felt fear in facing his crucifixion. Dr. Ernie Manges writes,

> Origen's view was influenced by his adoption of the four cardinal virtues of Plato: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Like several other early Christian writers, Origen adopted these four cardinal virtues from Aristotle and Plato: prudence (which Origen calls wisdom), justice, fortitude (courage), and temperance. And so, he says a Christian should let God reign over him, not fear, which is the counterpart to fortitude.[12]

In Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, he referenced Christ's prayer at Gethsemane (Matt 26:39). Origen says that some "may think that the Savior was in a way afraid." Origen then cites Psalm 27:1–3, and states Christ cannot be inferior to the Psalmist, and indeed that the Psalm refers to Christ:

> Who because of the powerful protection given him by God is afraid of no man. The heart of the Savior never feared when the whole camp of Satan was drawn up against Him. His heart, filled with divine knowledge, was confident in God when war rose against Him. It is therefore impossible that the same man should say in fear, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"; and with fortitude: "*Though an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.*" (Ps 27:3)[13]

9 Matt 26; Mark 14; Luke 22.

10 Jerajani, Jaju, Phiske, Lade, Nitin, "Hematohidrosis—A Rare Clinical," 290–92.

11 Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame*, Kindle Location 397.

12 Adamantius, *Homilies on Luke*, 152. And Author discussions with Dr. Manges, PhD, Early Church History.

13 Adamantius, *Homilies on Luke*, 152. Origen himself proved to be a person of fortitude and faithful to Christ to the end. As a teen, he wanted to join his father, arrested for the crime of being a Christian, but apparently, his mother prevented that by hiding Origen's clothes. At the end of his life, he was tortured during the persecution under Emperor Decius and probably died of those wounds a couple of years later.

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While Origen's example of faithful endurance in serving Christ is exemplary, I differ from his interpretation and understanding of fear. The writer of Hebrews (vv. 2:17 and 4:15) makes it clear that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. This includes the temptation to let fear paralyze and overtake us. Yet Jesus did not give in to fear and instead moved forward in obedience and courage to his calling to die a terrifying death on the cross.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas transformed Aristotelian courage from simply being defined as a noble death on the battlefield to a broader definition. The one principal act of perfect courage is found in the ideal martyr, Jesus Christ, as the paradigm of a courageous person.[14] He stated that endurance is the chief act of courage since it is more challenging than aggression (in battle). He wrote, "The principal act of courage is to endure and withstand dangers doggedly rather than attack them."[15] While Aquinas offers a more helpful description, it is still limiting what may be considered courageous. What about those led by Christ out of danger? Is that not courageous?

Finally, here are some excerpts of sermons preached in 2020 in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic on the topic of fear from Sermon Central:[16]

- "*Simply trust Jesus, and your fears will disappear.*"
- "*True Christians don't fear death.*"
- "*Think of some things tempting you to flirt with worry and disobey God.*"
- "*I want us delivered from the spirit of fear.*" (While the Bible speaks of a spirit of fear, this statement implies that all fear is from the devil.)
- "*If you are afraid today, you have forgotten who God is.*"
- "*Faith is the opposite of fear; fear is sin so ignore your fear.*"
- "*We need to live a life free of fear.*"
- "*At the crossroads of faith and fear, choose faith.*"[17]
- "*When facing fear, faith, or foolishness, choose faith.*"

From this progression of thinking and teaching on fear and courage over the past twenty-five hundred years comes the false idea that courage is risking our lives for Christ without fear and not retreating from danger.

14 Qiaoying, "Aquinas' Transformation," 483.

15 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIb, 123–28.

16 Sermon Central, "Fear."

17 I just heard this preached again on a Sunday morning in an American church, February 2022. While it's true we want to choose faith, it implies the way to handle fear is to ignore it. It is a pithy statement that does not equip or clarify.

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“The kind of people we designate as courageous or fearful reveals our cultural values.”

When Christ-followers carry this perspective into dangerous situations, it often leads to confusion, discouragement, and disempowerment.

Mistaking Greco-Roman definitions and the resulting Western worldview for biblical teaching on fear and courage not only does violence to this topic and God's people while misrepresenting what the Bible teaches, but also results in poor shepherding of people who risk their lives for Christ daily. Life's most profound questions demand critical and thoughtful deliberation. The kind of people we designate as courageous or fearful reveals our cultural values.

Christ-followers living in hostile situations and daily encountering threats naturally feel fear. Howard Thurman, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, writes,

> The fear encountered daily at the root of the relationship] between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of the environment and those who are controlled by it … arises out of the sense of isolation and helplessness … in the perpetual threat of violence everywhere.[18]

Not being able or allowed to fight back, not understanding the meaning of the reality of what is happening, or being the recipient of personally targeted evil and violence often may cause paralysis and resignation. Thurman continues, “The masses of men and women live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.”[19]

Framing the Global Reality

Thurman, a pastor in the mid-twentieth century, wrote about the daily reality of oppression experienced by Blacks in America. Extending Thurman's description of “their backs against the wall” to Christ-followers worldwide suffering constant oppressive persecution, what are we facing if our backs are against the wall? It can be summarized with this simple quote: “Christianity has become, by far, the most persecuted religion.”[20]

According to secular research by the non-partisan think tank, the Pew Research Center, about three-fourths of the world's population lives under a government that has extensively restricted religious freedoms.[21] According to Cochran,

18 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 37.

19 Thurman, 13.

20 Montgomery, “New Age.”

21 Cochran, “What Kind of Persecution?” 34. The importance of Cochran's article should not be underestimated.

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