

1-1-2010

Things That Matter: Courage

John F. Wilson
john.wilson@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilson, John F. (2010) "Things That Matter: Courage," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 3, Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss3/7>

This Sermon is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Things That Matter: Courage

JOHN F. WILSON

SCENE 1

The time: a few years ago.

The place: a high school library in a Christian school in Memphis, Tennessee.

As told in the award-winning film, *The Blind Side*: A young man from the streets of Memphis, adopted into an upper middle class home, is struggling with his education. Michael is a great football player but he is failing his English class. Knowing full well that failure will make him ineligible for athletic scholarships, he is ready to give up. The challenge is too great, the chance of failure too daunting. His foster father approaches the problem in an unexpected and unusual way—he quotes a poem to Michael. It is a poem about courage in the face of almost certain death: Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”

*Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,*

*All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

*Cannon to the right of them
Cannon to the left of them
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder 'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.*

“Why would anyone do that?” Michael asks. “What’s the point?” His adopted father replies, “The point is that this is about courage. It’s about doing what one must do, regardless of the consequences.” “But they will all be killed!” “Yes, Michael, sometimes being courageous will mean that you will die.”

SCENE 2

The time: October 25, 1854.

The place: Balaclava, Ukraine.

The Crimean War is raging. Six hundred British cavalymen, mounted on their horses, are ordered to charge ahead through a valley with enemy guns on the hillside to the right, on the hillside to the left, and straight ahead. They charge ahead, fully aware they have little chance of making it though the valley alive. Two hundred and forty-seven of these men are in the last minutes of their lives. Tennyson's famous poem honors their courage.

*All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred:
"Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.*

*Boldly they rode and well
Into the jaws of Death
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.*

*Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.*

SCENE 3

The time: Saturday, February 23, c. 160 A.D.

The place: the Roman Stadium in Smyrna, Asia Minor (modern Izmir, Turkey).

Thousands of people have come to see the cruel Roman games and the execution of criminals. Suddenly a hush falls over the crowd as an old man—86 years old—is brought into the area. His name is Polycarp. He is an elder in the church of the Christians at Smyrna and a disciple of the first disciples of Jesus. When they realize his identity, the crowd erupts into jeers of scorn and hatred and is quickly transformed into an angry, bloodthirsty mob.

The Roman governor tries to take pity on such a gentle old man and urges Polycarp to save himself from an awful death. He urges, "Simply say 'Caesar Lord.'" All Polycarp has to do is say these words and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue and he will escape torture and death. He does not even have to really believe that Caesar is Lord; all he has to do is make this gesture to placate the mob. "Swear, and I will set you at liberty," the governor pleaded, "Reproach Christ." Polycarp raised a steady hand and answered in a calm and steady voice: "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? You say I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am. Hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian." The governor said, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, unless you repent." And Polycarp replied, "Call them then, for we

are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil.” Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused to compromise his beliefs and died a horrible death before the howling mob.

*Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell . . .*

SCENE 4

The time: a few weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus.

The place: the Jerusalem meeting chamber of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish equivalent of the United States House of Representatives, Senate and Supreme Court, and the College of Cardinals—all in one body.

All the most powerful people in the nation are there—including the High Priest himself. So are the most famous and respected scholars of the day—the graduate faculty of the nation’s universities. In the dock are two uneducated fishermen, with their countrified Galilean accents and boorish peasant clothes. Yesterday they had been arrested for preaching without permission in a public place and practicing medicine without a license, and they had spent the night in jail. These might seem to be crimes unworthy of such a hearing, but the fact is that these two were definitely dangerous. They were dangerous because thousands of people were accepting what they had to say about another Galilean peasant—Jesus of Nazareth.

“By what power or what name did you do this?” asked the Court. Peter then proceeded to give a brilliant defense of himself and his associate John—and of their message about Jesus. The author of Acts says, “When they saw the *courage* of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4.13). “‘To stop this thing from spreading any further among the people,’ the officials said, ‘we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name’ . . . Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied [looking right into the faces—be it remembered—of the Senate, the House, and the Supreme Court], ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard’” (Acts 4.18–20).

*Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell . . .*

SCENE 5

The time: mid-morning, Sunday, May, 2010.

The place: the campus of Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

About 11:00 a.m. a group of fanatical anti-Christian terrorists somehow overcome the attendants at the campus guard booth and move into the center of the campus. They hear Christian hymns emanating from a nearby building. They rush toward the sound of singing, break down the doors, and run into the hall, pointing their automatic weapons at the crowd of worshippers. One by one, each person present is told to stand against the front wall. (By the way, in case you are wondering, the answer is “Yes”—you will have your turn.) “You will be asked one question,” the terrorist leader says. “It is a simple question and requires only a simple answer. It is this: Are you a Christian? If the answer is no, you will be released. If the answer is yes, you will be shot.”

“But,” someone says, “the scene you describe makes no sense. Martyrdom belongs to ancient times—Christians being thrown to the lions, burned at the stake—that sort of thing.” In fact, the only “martyrs” we

hear about today are Islamic terrorists who call themselves martyrs, but aren't martyrs at all. A martyr is a witness—someone will let others kill him rather than renounce his faith. He is not someone who himself kills innocent people. But the days of Christian martyrdom ended long, long ago.

In fact you may be surprised, even stunned, to learn that there were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in any other century since the day of Jesus. An Italian author recently conducted an historical study in which he attempted to use surviving records to estimate the number of people who have died because of their faith in Christ since the first century. The total number was astounding: 70 million! But perhaps more astounding was the conclusion that of that 70 million, 45.5 million—fully 65 percent—had died during the twentieth century! Among the countries where Christians are still being killed today are the Moluccas Islands of Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, East Timor, Cuba, several former Soviet republics, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, China and a number of others. Today the most severe persecution and murder of Christians takes place in the Sudan. A little known result of the war in Iraq has been a persistent persecution of the Christians in that country—communities that have survived since the days of the apostles, but are now disappearing in a trail of blood.

The figures I have mentioned belong to the twentieth century. Who knows what the twenty-first century will bring? And because we do not know, courage—even today, and even here, is still one of the “things that matter.”

COURAGE TODAY

The famous theologian Paul Tillich wrote a book entitled *The Courage to Be*. In it he introduced a two-word definition of the word “religion.” Religion, he said, is “ultimate concern.” It is the thing that most concerns us or is the most basic of all our concerns. It is the thing we are willing to die for—unless our ultimate concern is mere preservation of life. But courage involves more than dying for the faith. The call to courage occurs every day. And it is not always the courage to face enemy cannons, or a firing squad, or an angry mob. Sometimes the kind of courage called for in those dramatic scenes is the easiest kind. When someone says to you, “Renounce your faith or else I will shoot you” the issues are rather clearly defined and stand out in clear black and white. It may be difficult to face the consequences of course, and our courage might fail, but at least we would know what is the right thing to do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who made the decision under Hitler to die for his faith, once said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die . . .” But the call does not come in the same way for everyone. The call often comes more subtly and more ambiguously. In Bonhoeffer's stirring words: “Every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others He does not allow to be tempted above that they are able to bear . . .”

Most of us fall into this second category.

But for us courage may be called for in a far more nuanced way. It is unlikely to be the kind of courage demanded of the six hundred members of the Light Brigade. It may be moral courage rather than physical courage. And as Mark Twain once said: “It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.”

Many other secular writers—some of them even politicians—have spoken about this other kind of courage.

- (1) Dorothy Thompson, who as a journalist stood up to Hitler, said, “Only when we are no longer afraid to die do we begin to live.”
- (2) Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.”
- (3) Senator Margaret Chase Smith said, “Moral cowardice that keeps us from speaking our minds is as

dangerous to this country as irresponsible talk. The right way is not always the popular and easy way. Standing for right when it is unpopular is a true test of moral character.”

- (4) Susan B. Anthony, the crusader for women’s rights, said “Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.”
- (5) Theodore H. White, the author, said, “To go against the dominant thinking of your friends, of most of the people you see every day, is perhaps the most difficult act of heroism you can perform.”

This kind of courage is as central to the Christian life as the courage to be a martyr. You may never be called on to give up your life. But I can guarantee that you will be called on to show moral courage—that may happen before this very day is done.

The New Testament puts such courage at the center of discipleship. Hebrews 3.5–7 says, “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.” And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage.

Courage is never easy. The easy challenges do not call for courage. And even someone as totally committed to Jesus as Paul was not free from the awful struggle with fear. Imprisoned for his faith, and facing an uncertain fate, he says to his friends, with whom he can be totally transparent: “Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1.19–21).

And here is the advice this same Paul gave to the disciples in Corinth: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be people of courage; be strong” (1 Cor 16.13).

Courage means having the strength to do the right thing when everyone around you is doing the wrong thing. It is speaking up when someone needs to speak up—despite the consequences. It is voting yes or voting no, when you know full well that you are outnumbered a hundred to one. I grew up around this sort of quiet courage. During World War II my father’s coworkers were plotting to do some evil things to a Japanese American family and he spoke up in their defense. Because he did that, he had to come home that day and face his family with bruises all over his body and a bloody nose.

We live in an age of tolerance. And tolerance is a good thing. Tolerance comes from the realization that other people have a right to their opinion, and that we Christians have not been sent to judge the world. But the path from tolerance to apathy is a short and slippery one. “Tolerance” may become a term to describe just not caring one way or the other, just dismissing every moral choice by saying “whatever.” No one with a “whatever” attitude toward life ever died for his or her convictions. Apathy never created a martyr and apathy never created a hero. It is good to be tolerant and to be kind and respectful to those who differ with you. But when you stand in the valley of decision, and your leader orders you forward into the jaws of death, Paul’s words to the Corinthians should be ringing in your ears: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be people of courage; be strong.”

JOHN F. WILSON IS AN ELDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHRIST IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA.

