

Profiles of Courageous Men

2 Samuel 23:9-10; Daniel 3; Philemon

The Bible is a book of stories. Most of those stories are biographies, and most of the biographies are about men. Some are tragic stories of sin and failure: Cain murdered his brother; Eli failed as a father; Judas betrayed Jesus. But many of the stories are profiles of courage. They were men who did what was good and right even under difficult circumstances. They were men who made their sons and daughters proud.

You may know the more famous men whose names are still common today, like Noah, Abraham, David, Daniel, Peter, John, Paul and Timothy. But I invite you to meet some courageous men whose names are less familiar but whose courage was outstanding.

Let me introduce you to Eleazar. He was a soldier in the army of King David around 1000 BC. The great enemy of Israel was the neighbor nation of Philistia with constant threats, a strong army and fierce battles.

David identified an elite corps of his 30 best soldiers and called them his Mighty Men. They were competent, godly and fiercely loyal. David could trust them to do whatever needed to be done and to fight heroically no matter how fierce the conflict. It was a very high honor to be one of the Mighty Men.

There was a super-elite group of three named from the Mighty Men. They were the best of the best. The three were the most courageous soldiers in the nation. They did not whine or complain. They were not afraid of difficulty. They were willing to sacrifice anything, including their own lives. A very short biography of one of those three is in II Samuel 23:9-10:

... Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines

till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead.

Eleazar stood alone in battle. When the rest of the army retreated he stayed. When the enemy attacked he fought them. When he was so exhausted that his fingers froze to his sword, Eleazar kept on fighting.

It takes great courage to stay when others leave. It takes great courage to fight when you are outnumbered. It takes great courage to keep going when you are ready to drop from exhaustion.

Eleazar's courage left a heritage for all of history to follow. God honored his courage. God brought about a military victory that was humanly impossible. God added his victory to Eleazar's courage. That's what God does for good and courageous men.

Eleazar's father was honored. One of the repeated themes of the Bible is that fathers are honored or dishonored by their sons. While we do not know anything more about his dad, we do know that Eleazar was known by his father's name—son of Dodai the Ahohite. He made his father proud!

Eleazar honored his children. The hard-to-pronounce biblical names don't always mean much to us today but they meant everything to the people of

those generations. For at least a hundred years afterward there must have been children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who proudly told about their relationship to Eleazar.

We need men like Eleazar today—men who will stand and fight for the cause of God even if everyone else retreats; men who hang in there even when they want to quit; men who honor their fathers before them and their children after them; men like the courageous Eleazar.

One of the repeated themes of the Bible is that fathers are honored or dishonored by their sons.

A second profile in courage joins together three names in a famous and familiar story of spectacular faith and courage. It is the story of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Are these names familiar to you? Perhaps you know them by different names.

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were kidnapped and raised by strangers. Although born Jewish, they were raised to be pagan Babylonians in the 6th century BC under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. They were fed a foreign diet, taught a new language, kept from their families and given new names. Their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah but their Babylonian names were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Isn't it interesting that most Bible readers remember them better by their pagan names than by their original Hebrew names?

Nebuchadnezzar was a very powerful emperor. He was also a nut. Increasingly convinced that he was god, Nebuchadnezzar built a huge statue of himself and ordered everyone in Babylon to bow down and worship it. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah refused because they knew the first of the Ten Commandments:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

These three courageous young Hebrew men refused to bow down. The king threatened them with death by cremation. We read about it in Daniel 3:13-18:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

What amazing courage! They remembered the lessons of God they had learned when they were very young. They held firm to the truth of God even after they received extensive pagan indoctrination. Never underestimate the lifelong power of what we teach children at home and in Sunday School. It can be stronger than public education, peer pressure and MTV combined. Men of courage will remember and do what is right even when they are trained to do what is wrong.

They were ready to die for their faith. Death by cremation is too awful to imagine; yet, these young men would rather die by torture than compromise their love and loyalty to God. God was absolutely and unquestionably Number One in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

They were faithful to God no matter what happened. Did they want to be rescued from cremation? Of course! Did they believe that God was stronger than either the emperor or the executioners? Absolutely! Yet, they were going to do what was right whether God saved them or not! Again, here are their words:

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

In today's culture, these three men of courageous faith would say that faithfulness to God is the right thing to do even if you lose your job, your friends, your money, your girlfriend or your life. Never compromise God under any threat. God can save you from anything, but even if God does not intervene, still do what is right!

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were young

men of great courage!

A third profile of courage is recorded in one of the shortest books of the Bible (so short that we can read the entire book in just a few minutes). The date was around AD 60. St. Paul was a prisoner in Rome awaiting the outcome of an appeal to Caesar. While in Rome he met Onesimus, a young runaway slave from the city of Colossae, and they became friends. After Onesimus became a Christian he became Paul's personal assistant.

Perhaps at first Paul did not know that Onesimus was a slave. It is not something a runaway slave would be quick to tell a Roman citizen like Paul. Apparently Onesimus had stolen from his owner and then run away to Rome where he hoped to keep his freedom by getting lost in the mass of urban population.

There were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. The economy of the empire depended on them. Some slaves were teachers and physicians; others were farmers and laborers. In every case, the owner had absolute power of life and death over slaves. In the best of cases, slaves were treated like members of the family. In the worst of cases they were beaten, tortured, branded and crucified. Sometimes they were severely treated for the smallest infraction of arbitrary household rules. The Romans knew that there was always a risk of an uprising and that slaves had to be kept under control by every means. Otherwise, a rebellion could be successful because the slaves significantly outnumbered the free Roman citizens.

When Paul found out that Onesimus was a slave he sent him back to his owner in Colossae, a man named Philemon. Paul knew Philemon well. Philemon was an affluent Christian leader of the Colossian church. But, that did not guarantee that Philemon would treat Onesimus well. Two standard punishments for runaways were to brand their foreheads with the letter "F" for fugitivus (fugitive) or publicly crucify them as a public example to other slaves.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon and gave it to Onesimus to take back with him. Here is what the letter said in Philemon 1-25:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became

my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me

while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He

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is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Imagine yourself in Onesimus' situation. You were a slave. You escaped. At last, you are free. You became a Christian. Now you are being sent back to a master from whom you stole. The outcome is anything but certain. All that stands between you and the branding iron or the cross is a single page of rolled up scroll with a letter pleading your case. Would you not be tempted to destroy the letter and never return? Wouldn't there be a stronger pull toward freedom than to slavery? Wouldn't you argue that slavery was wrong?

Onesimus decided to make things right even if the other guy was wrong. He returned to Colossae. He gave the letter to Philemon. He trusted God to take care of him. Onesimus was one very courageous man.

What would such courage look like today? Perhaps it would mean going back to a former employer or teacher or spouse or another Philemon in your life—to make things right, even if the other person was wrong and even if the outcome is anything but certain.

Well, that's the end of the story. The Bible never tells us what happened. We assume that Onesimus returned and did not destroy the letter because we still have it!

But there is a hint of the outcome of his courageous profile. It is set in the great city of Ephesus. The ruins of Ephesus are one of the archaeological wonders of the world. (I have been there several times.) It was the home of a strong and famous church pastored by the biblical leader Timothy and it was the recipient of the New Testament book called Ephesians. Fifty years after Paul wrote to Philemon from his Roman prison cell there was a wonderful bishop leading the church of Ephesus—Bishop Onesimus.

Not all courageous stories end up so well, but many do. Men of courage follow a God of good.

Father or son, young man or old, may your name be added to the list of God's profiles of courage. As a courageous follower of Jesus Christ you may be called on to fight alone while others retreat or to be faithful against awful threats or maybe to go back to make things right. Do what is right regardless of the threats or outcome.

Be courageous for God. Make your name a source of delight and pride for your father and for your son and, most of all, for God himself.

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