



## COURAGE

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Last November, Mary Jo Coady walked into her daughter's room and saw the iron lying on the floor. As she stared at it, she noticed that there was some discoloration on the bottom. She looked at it some more and lo and behold, realized it looked like the face of Jesus. And she decided then and there that it was a sign. Having recently gone through some tough times, she came to the conclusion that the face was there to tell her that "life was going to be good." Maybe you could say all the wrinkles would work out...

I hope life IS good for Mary Jo. But when I read that story, I thought "Wow. An iron? People sure latch on to some pretty flimsy ideas of hope." It's sad when there are such strong, direct messages from Jesus that are far clearer and more substantial than a rust stain on an iron. There is solid reason for hope in his very own words.

We're looking at some of those words as found in the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Seven letters from Jesus himself. The themes of each letter are different, and I'm summarizing each one with a single word that captures the main point of that letter. These seven words give us a great foundation for understanding what it means to be all in, all out and all up for God.

Does anybody remember the word from the letter to Ephesus? It was love. Jesus was calling the church back to its first love. And we said no matter where you are, you can always turn around and head back, and Jesus will meet you.

Once again, John is having this vision in which he sees Jesus in all his glory. Jesus is dictating these letters to him, intended to strengthen and motivate these seven churches to stay true to their faith. This morning we're looking at the second letter, to a church facing a much different situation than the Ephesians.

### **Revelation 2:8-11**

*To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

*These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*

This past Christmas, my parents gave our family a game called Bananagrams. Have you ever gotten a gift and wondered why in the world the other person gave it to you? You open it and tell yourself, “Okay...keep smiling. Come up with something nice to say.” You start to wonder what it means that they thought you would look good in that sweater. Or that they thought you’d love a CD of elevator music.

So they gave us this game, which was nowhere near my wish list. First of all, we’re not a huge table game family. And second of all, this one looked ridiculous. It came in a zippered banana. Plus, our kids have never been big fans of scrabble, and this banana was full of letters like scrabble tiles.

Not a very promising start. But we decided to give it a try. And guess what? I love it. From the first time we played it, I knew this was my game. If they ever add Bananagrams to the Olympics, I will so win at least a bronze. Actually the whole family really likes it. It’s a lot of fun. We never would have thought to buy it for ourselves, but it ended up being a great gift.

On a first read through this letter to Smyrna, you might be thinking, “Wow...not quite sure what to do with this letter.” So much of it is so far removed from our world. This church was extremely poor. Definitely not middle-class suburban America. Their biggest struggle seemed to be with members of the Jewish community. To my knowledge, there haven’t been any rabbis out picketing New Day. Christians in Smyrna were about to go to prison and some would die for their faith. Hardly something we relate to. And this whole letter is addressing all those experiences.

It wouldn’t seem like the best fit for us to relate to. But the more I dug into this letter, the more I could see how it applied to us. It spoke to me. And the word that seemed to come through the loudest was the word **courage**. Which is kind of funny, because Jesus never actually uses the word courage in the letter at all. But it is there all the way through, and the letter turns out to be a very good gift.

What is courage anyway? We know it when we see it in someone. But how do we define it? We can have all kinds of ideas about what it really is, and some of those ideas are better than others. I picked up a book this week called “In a pit with a lion on a snowy day.” The title caught my attention so I wanted to see what the author was talking about. He was basing his book on a brief little verse from the Old Testament about a man named Benaiah.

## **2 Samuel 23:20**

*Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant fighter from Kabzeel, who performed great exploits. He struck down two of Moab's best men. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion.*

This guy was brave. Benaiah was chasing lions instead of the lions chasing him. Even though the conditions were snowy and slippery, he went for it. The author's point was that we all should be chasing down our lions and showing that kind of courage.

It's a very inspiring, motivational idea. But the more I thought about it, the more I questioned the logic behind it. Not to take anything away from what Benaiah did, but I don't think that's a great model of courage for all the rest of us. Because most of the time, jumping into a pit with a lion isn't courageous – it's just foolish. We can't look at what that man did in that one situation and say that courage equals doing what would normally seem crazy. Sometimes it might, but sometimes it might mean choosing the safe, unexciting path around the pit.

Mary Anne Radmacher once said, "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'"

So if crazy bravery isn't courage, what is? For our purposes today, I would define it this way:

***Courage is when conviction overrides fear in the face of danger***

Now if we unpack this definition a little more, there are words within it we need to be clear about. The first is conviction. By that I simply mean whatever it is we're convinced of. When a jury convicts a criminal, it is because they have become convinced that the person is guilty. A conviction is a belief we hold so strongly that it shapes how we act. The picture of the single person standing in front of the line of tanks in Tiananmen Square is a great example of someone acting out of conviction instead of being afraid.

So what kind of convictions are big enough to override fear? What do we need to be convinced of? There are really two categories:

### **1. Convictions of what is TRUE**

If I'm going skydiving for the first time, I will naturally be afraid. The thought of jumping out of a plane flying at 10,000 feet is nerve racking. But if I am hooked up to a professional skydiver who has done it a million times and who has a parachute and a back up parachute, the truth of who that person is will be enough to let me overcome my fear and do the jump.

As we go through life, we will come up against many scary things, some we've never encountered before. And they will naturally be frightening. But if we are hooked into God, we can learn to trust the truths about him that are bigger than our circumstances. Those are the truths that need to grow into convictions for us. A second kind of conviction is

### **2. Convictions of what is RIGHT**

Sometimes we may have solid moral ground for doing something because we've been hurt. Several courses of action would be completely justified. But there are times when we will be called to forego what we're entitled to and choose our actions instead based on what is morally right rather than simply factually accurate. And that takes a lot of courage. I talked with two different people this week who were both making courageous moves based on this type of conviction. Both of them had ample reason to stick up for themselves and be angry at somebody else. But in both cases they said, "I couldn't do it." They were each sensing God's Spirit guide them in such a way that they had to act on conviction instead of fear, because they KNEW it was the right thing to do.

Those are the categories of thought that have enough horsepower to help me when I'm truly afraid. If courage is just trying to put on a brave face and stand my ground, I won't last very long. I don't have it in me. But if I have some rock solid convictions I can hold on to, then I have a concrete way to overcome my fears. And I can ask myself in any given situation what is motivating me to make my choice: Am I concerned with what is true, or what scares me? Am I doing this because I think it's right or because I'm too afraid to do anything else?

If we walk through the dangers the church in Smyrna was facing, we can begin to see how courage might play out in real life. Because they were facing multiple threats that were very real and very serious. Let's run through them individually. First, Jesus says,

*I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich!*

### **1. Facing the NEED of the moment**

The city of Smyrna, which is modern day Izmir, Turkey, is the only one of the seven cities that really still exists today, which speaks to how well established it was. In New Testament times, it is estimated there were probably 200,000 people living there. It was an important city in the Roman Empire and very loyal to Rome. It was the first city to have a temple dedicated to Rome, as well as a temple built for the worship of Emperor Tiberius.

Given the enthusiasm and pride over all things Roman, Smyrna was a difficult place to be a Christian. When you couldn't bow down and pledge yourself to the Emperor, when you didn't believe in the whole system of Roman gods, it posed a problem. So when Jesus mentions their poverty, it's not because of a citywide economic slump. The poverty was specific to the Christians because they were experiencing discrimination and persecution. Earning a living there was hard if you were trying to be true to your faith.

When there's not enough money, there's not enough of anything. So the Christians in Smyrna had the legitimate fear, "How are we going to survive?"

Do you ever have that fear, where the walls are closing in and you don't see the resources to meet the need? When all you see is what you lack, it can become a paralyzing reality.

So how did Jesus speak into the Smyrnians' situation? First, he told them he knew their poverty. He acknowledged that it was true. But more than that, he knew it from the inside out. If anybody gets poverty, it's Jesus, who left the glory of heaven behind when he became human.

## **2 Corinthians 8:9**

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Jesus experienced hunger. He went through life lacking possessions. He connects with poverty on a personal level, and so he validates where the church is at and that there is serious need there. But he also then points them to a truth they weren't recognizing, which was that they were rich at the same time. Why? Because they had him. It's exactly what Paul told the Philippians:

## **Philippians 4:19**

*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*

The unshakable truth the church in Smyrna needed to cling to to have courage was that God is still Jehovah Jireh – the God who provides for us. He makes a way where there is no way, and as long as they had God, they would have enough.

There is a saying in Norwegian that says, "There will be a solution when that time comes. The Lord will provide." Karin's great-grandfather and great-grandmother came from Norway and homesteaded in the plains of Saskatchewan. One summer, there was a terrible drought on the farm. They were only able to harvest 500 bushels of grain from 640 acres, which was a fraction of a normal harvest. Karin's great-grandpa didn't know how they would possibly survive the winter on so little. There would be no money for food or clothes or next year's seed.

Then one day, a stranger showed up at the door and said, "I hear you're looking to sell some of your milk cows." Karin's great-grandpa couldn't remember telling anybody he wanted to do that. But he invited the man in. The man asked if he could milk the cows and spend the night, which he did. He took samples of milk from the cows and put them in little vials, and the next morning he could tell exactly how much butterfat was in each cow's milk. And he decided to buy five cows. That sale provided all the money that was needed to make up for the failed crops. They were able to buy their food, clothing, oats for the animals and seed for the following year – all from the sale to the mysterious stranger. There will be a solution when that time comes. The Lord will provide.

What is your need, your lack this morning? Sometimes it's not financial poverty, but a lack of something else – lack of opportunity, lack of expertise, lack of options, lack of strength. Fear would have you believe it is too big a need for God. But we serve the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. And he's always willing to sell a few to take care of us. It is only as we come to believe the truth of his care for us and his ability to provide that we will have courage to face the lack that we have.

It wasn't just poverty that was pressing in on the church of Smyrna. Jesus comments about some resistance they were getting from those outside the church.

*I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

### **Facing the LIE of the moment**

The church in Smyrna was not only misunderstood by the pagan culture around it – they were misunderstood by many in the Jewish community as well. Most of the people in Smyrna would have seen the early Christians as a branch of Judaism. Most first converts to the faith were Jewish. But there was a group within the Jewish community that was actively and aggressively persecuting the church.

Jesus says these individuals shouldn't even be allowed to call themselves God's people, because they're acting as agents of the devil. And what are they doing? He says they are speaking slander against the church. They were telling lies about them and to them. It was probably much along the same lines as the people who lied about Jesus at his trial and twisted his words against him.

When you hear people who are insisting that your beliefs aren't right, when they are constantly questioning your character and attacking you day after day, it can begin to plant the seeds of doubt in your mind. What if they're correct? What if you've invested yourself in something that is totally wrong?

Jesus responds to the situation by first telling the people of Smyrna that he knows the lies. He is not unaware of what is happening. Back when I was first starting to lead worship at our old church, I quickly encountered someone who did not like what I was doing. I was messing with tradition and it was not appreciated. That kind of opposition was a new experience for me and very unsettling. I don't like it when people are unhappy with me, and I started to question myself. Was I making a big mistake?

Then I sat down with the pastor and told him what was going on. And he was very calming and unsurprised at all by the attack. And he wanted me to keep doing what I was doing. And that changed everything for me. Knowing I was not alone helped me realize that I was not crazy. He was also the voice of authority to speak into the situation, and I knew if he had my back, I would be okay.

The same is true for the church in Smyrna. Knowing Jesus knew what was going on made all the difference, because it was his opinion that mattered in the end. And he stated directly that this attacking group was doing something evil.

In other words, Jesus became their measurement of truth. He gave them an alternative to believe instead of the lies they were being fed.

What lies are you up against today? Lies can be a form of spiritual attack. Satan is called the father of lies in Scripture, and he loves to whisper them in our ear. Maybe it is the lie that you're worthless. Maybe it's the lie that you're unlovable or unforgivable. Maybe it's the lie that what you believe about God doesn't matter, or the lie that some sin in your life isn't a big deal. There are all kinds of deceptions we fall for, and they can leave us confused and lost in a spiritual fog.

Rollo May once said, "The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity." We just accept the lie. But Jesus still gives us the same response: He knows what's going on, and it's evil. Our choice is whether or not we will let him be the measurement of Truth for us when all the world around us says, "Stop caring and go along."

Jesus gives the conviction to stand up to the lies. He next tells the church in Smyrna,

*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.*

Jesus doesn't sugar coat at all. They ARE going to suffer. Courage means

### **Facing the FEELINGS of the moment**

The word here for suffering in the Greek is the same word for passion and intense feeling. In this case, it's a negative one – physical pain. There was a good chance some people from the Smyrna church might be tortured for their faith or meet with an excruciating form of execution. The things they were about to feel would require true courage to endure.

It doesn't always help to tell somebody who is about to undergo a trauma of some kind that they shouldn't be afraid. If I found out you were having heart surgery tomorrow and I said, "Don't worry. It will be a piece of cake," it wouldn't mean much. I don't know what I'm talking about – I've never been through that.

On the other hand, my dad has had many opportunities to calm people's fears about heart surgery and it has been extremely helpful. Why? Because he's had a triple bypass. He knows what the experience is like from the inside out, from the shock of getting the news you need it to the months of recovery afterwards.

The reason Jesus can speak with any kind of credibility when he tells the church not to be afraid is because he has felt everything they're going to experience. It all comes back to the cross. The source of confidence and conviction for us is grounded in the truth of what Jesus walked through on earth.

We may never be tortured for our faith, but every person in this room knows what it's like to have strong feelings you'd rather avoid. We all have feelings defenses that kick in when we're afraid to go to those painful places. We joke it off, distract ourselves, act tough or stuff it all down inside.

But Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid to go there. I’ve experienced the full range of human emotions. You can get through this with me. I know because I’ve been there.”

Jesus continues to speak to what the church in Smyrna has in front of it, and he says,

*I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.*

Prison in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was very different than it is now. Today, we think of prison primarily as a place where you go to serve your time after you’ve been convicted. But back then, prison was more of a holding tank or waiting room. It was where you went to wait for your trial or where you waited to be executed. It was that in between space.

I think that’s an interesting way to think about it, because we definitely need courage for

### **Facing the WAITING of the moment**

Imagine sitting in a Roman prison, uncertain whether you will be released or sent to your death. Your mind would flip flop back and forth, playing out every scenario over and over. It would be agonizing to sit there and wonder what was going to happen. The fear of the unknown could consume you.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is wait. Many of you right now may feel like you are in some kind of a holding tank. You’re at the mercy of other people making decisions and you’re not sure what’s going to happen. It is a place of helplessness.

What we need in those moments is the assurance Jesus offered at the very top of the letter:

*These are the words of him who is the First and the Last...*

God already knows how things end. He’s already there! Jesus is with us from the very beginning clear to the very end. He is a whole process Savior, start to finish.

We may be waiting, but we are waiting hand in hand with the One who knows the outcome and who will still be there with us no matter what else happens. Our waiting becomes transformed from waiting for something else to happen to simply waiting for God to reveal it. Our hope and focus can transfer to him in our times of waiting.

I love how the Message version translates Lamentations 3:

### **Lamentations 3:24-31**

*I'm sticking with GOD (I say it over and over).  
He's all I've got left.*

*GOD proves to be good to the man who passionately waits,  
to the woman who diligently seeks.  
It's a good thing to quietly hope,  
quietly hope for help from GOD.  
It's a good thing when you're young  
to stick it out through the hard times.*

*When life is heavy and hard to take,  
go off by yourself. Enter the silence.  
Bow in prayer. Don't ask questions:  
Wait for hope to appear.  
Don't run from trouble. Take it full-face.  
The "worst" is never the worst.*

*Why? Because the Master won't ever  
walk out and fail to return.*

The courage to face the waiting of the moment comes from knowing we are not abandoned there. God is with us in the holding tank, and he'll be with us after it is over. He's the first and the last.

Finally, Jesus helps the church in Smyrna find courage for

### **Facing the DEATH of the moment**

*Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

There was no getting around the fact that some of the Christians in Smyrna were going to be called upon to give up their lives for their faith. The real fear in dying isn't so much about suffering and pain as it is about loss. Dying is an end. The thought of never again seeing family or experiencing the world is too much grief to take. We can't even conceive of what might happen after that.

Christ is very clear on this point: There is life after death. And he promises it to those who choose him. When he was on earth, he said the exact same thing to his disciples:

### **Luke 9:24-25**

*...whoever loses his life for me will save it.*

Here again, we are worlds away from what the church in Smyrna was about to endure. Any attempts at comparisons would not do justice to the horrible position they were in. But that doesn't change the fact that every day, we are confronted with the need for a kind of spiritual death. We are called to die to ourselves, to die to our pride, to put to death the sinful desires inside us. And that in itself can be a frightening thing.

Because we don't know what life looks like on the other side of that death. Sometimes we're pretty attached to our sins, and saying goodbye to them once and for all terrifies us. We don't know what to expect beyond them. But here's a conviction we can claim in the face of that fear:

***Christ doesn't ask us to die to anything without promising new life on the other side.***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who died for his convictions during World War II, had this to say about dying to yourself:

*To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: "He leads the way, keep close to him."*

That's really what courage is all about – keeping close to Christ. Because he is the one who gives us the conviction to know what is true and what is right.

You can see that those five things the church in Smyrna was facing are difficulties we face all the time. Which fear are you facing in this moment? Whatever it is, Jesus himself can become your courage, because he's the only one who offers us the solid convictions we need.

He leads the way, keep close to him.