

Power Made Perfect in Weakness

BY REBECCA KONYNDYK DEYOUNG

What does it mean to have courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? While our culture may idolize strength in adversity and tough self-reliance, courage has another side that many of us have not thought about much. It is revealed when our vulnerability is greatest and our own strength is exhausted.

When the Apostle Paul was struggling with personal pain or difficulty—the mysterious “thorn in the flesh” that he endured—he received from the Lord this answer to his recurring prayers for relief: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Several years ago, a young couple was featured in the newspaper, holding a picture of their 21-month-old daughter Macy, whom they had buried the day before. She died of a rare genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy. These parents went through a lot caring for Macy in her short life, but they knew exactly what they were up against. The same disorder had also claimed the lives of Macy’s older twin brother and sister just two and a half years earlier. The twins were diagnosed when they were six months old. They too died before their second birthday.

You might expect parents in a situation like this to be bitter, angry, and hardened by their experience. Macy’s mother and father freely admit how difficult life has been for them, how many questions they have for which they can’t find answers. As her father put it, “When they first told us this was a fatal disease, we didn’t know the half of what we were getting into.” Even the blurry newsprint on the front page of the paper conveys

faces marked by wounds that are fresh and deep. It is plain from the article, however, that their love for their children is greater than their pain. “‘We see Macy as a dancing angel,’ said her mother. ‘She is in heaven, able to breathe freely, playing with her sister and brother.’ The couple is not sure whether they will try to have another baby or adopt. But they do know they want to be parents again.”

What does it mean to have courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? When I first started writing about the virtue of courage, the newspapers were full of stories about the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Our vulnerability to suffering had suddenly become real. Whether pain and fear come on a large or small scale, we all need to face it somewhere, sometime.

Courage is probably one of the most familiar virtues. From cowboys to superheroes to decorated veterans, models of courage abound in our films and stories. In our culture, courage is perhaps better known as an American value than a Christian virtue, since it epitomizes qualities that Americans idolize: strength in adversity, tough self-reliance. Despite its apparent familiarity, however, courage has a side that many of us have not thought about much—the side of courage that is revealed in the endurance of great suffering and sometimes even death. This courage shows its real character when our vulnerability is greatest and our own strength is exhausted. Then, as the Apostle Paul puts it, God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.

In America we value independence, being able to take care of ourselves. As a result, we treat weakness, vulnerability, and suffering as evils to be avoided, prevented, and overcome. We live in “a cultural climate which fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering, but rather considers suffering the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs.”¹ For many, eliminating the evil of terrorism was the obvious response to the events of September 11. The suffering caused by those attacks was a horrific evil; there isn’t one of us who doesn’t want the world rid of it. Several years and multiple strategies later, however, it is easier to ask, Is the battle to eliminate all threats to our security one we can really hope to win? And at what cost?

A Christian view of courage knows that suffering, for all its horror, is not the greatest evil. It is worse to *do* evil than to *suffer* it. Christian courage also knows that it need not fear weakness; for it knows that suffering can be a crucible of self-transformation, an opportunity for new vision. Like Job, it is precisely when we are bent low from desperate weariness and pain that we are most likely to learn to say, “My ears had heard of you, but *now my eyes have seen you*” (Job 42:5, NIV, emphasis added).² This way of thinking about suffering has its source in a radically different understanding of strength and power.

WHO IS OUR MODEL?

What is the source of this understanding? As Christians we have a different ideal of goodness because we have a different role model in mind: becoming virtuous amounts to becoming more and more like Christ. Being created anew by the Spirit means emulating Christ's character—his wisdom, gentleness, and truthfulness. To understand each of the virtues, then, we should look first to what the person and life of Christ reveal to us. To understand the virtue of courage, we need to ask, What does Christ teach us about true strength?

He teaches this: that love can lead us to endure suffering and pain and even death on a cross. Do you want a model of courage? Look at Christ's life of suffering love. This model of courage is worth thinking about precisely because it is such a startling contrast with the typical American picture of courage. Perhaps it is a model of courage and strength of which only a Christian can make sense.

St. Augustine defines courage as "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the object beloved."³ For courage to point beyond itself, for love to bear all things, we must have something we love more than the suffering and pain we fear. Love is the *sine qua non* of courage. Without it, all the bravery in the world is mere gritted teeth. "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him," G. K. Chesterton once said of courage, "but because he loves what is behind him."⁴

One mistake we make about suffering is the idea that we must avoid pain at all times and places as the greatest evil. Even Socrates argued that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it, because there is nothing worse than the moral corruption that comes with perpetrating evil. In opposing the view that suffering is the worst thing imaginable, however, we must not glorify suffering for its own sake. Suffering isn't intrinsically good; it is not an end in itself. For this reason,

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Aquinas called courage an *enabling* virtue—it doesn't realize the good itself, but rather serves as an indispensable aid when the good is threatened. If there were no obstacles to truth and goodness in this world, there would be no need for courage. The courageous suffering we endorse, then, is not merely enduring pointless pain in a meaningless world. The suffering the Christian is called to bear is most often the result of trying to love others in

a world full of sin and wretchedness. Great love almost always involves suffering, whether it is in small doses of self-denial or great dramatic losses. Just as speaking in tongues and moving mountains is of no value without love, so courage is of no value without something good worth suffering *for*. If someone is suffering injury or pain because he doesn't love or respect himself, because he has been beaten into submission and self-

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hated, then suffering can deaden the soul, not enliven it. The martyrs died out of great love, not out of despair.

Aquinas and Aristotle agree that the courageous person doesn't have to enjoy being in threatening situations, but that person does have to think it's the best place to be because of the good it will win her in the end. The suffering endured is redeemed by the

good for the sake of which it endures, something that is only obtainable by walking through the fire, not around it.

It's easy to think of suffering as a passive response to evil. Evil comes upon us unbidden, and since we are powerless to resist it, we suffer. What is the virtue in that? Suffering doesn't seem to fit our picture of courage: courage is an action-adventure virtue, not a walk-all-over-me virtue. Aquinas tells us that the natural human reaction to a present evil is sorrow, and sorrow, when we can't escape it, easily degenerates into despair. The endurance of suffering can, therefore, involve active resistance to being overcome by despair, an energetic and courageous clinging to something good, a decision to hope. Thus, in contrast to his wife's resentment and resignation, Job's courage enables him to say, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). A suffering life is not the end for which we are created, even if it is an unavoidable part of our wayfaring to that end. When he set his face toward Jerusalem, Christ's mission was to suffer *for our sakes*, for the sake of love and its redeeming power to overcome suffering and death. When we endure suffering, we say by our endurance that we are waiting for something better, and we believe it is still coming. In *Lament for a Son*, Nick Wolterstorff speaks out of this faith-infused courage: "In my living, my son's death will not be the last word."⁵

Looking to Christ's example also teaches us that courage is first of all an inner quality, a spiritual strength. It does not, therefore, require physi-

cal power or military might or the ability to overcome another person with force. The disciples were still trying and failing to grasp this the night Christ died for them; perhaps we still are, too. This conception of courage puts strength of heart ahead of strength of fist and sword. It contrasts with the classic American hero, who through his own strength and cunning manages to escape desperate situations, overcome the bad guys, and win the day. It is also characteristically American that the hero wins the day totally on his own, without any help from anyone else. Whether the leading man is John Wayne or Sylvester Stallone, the ideal of self-sufficient power is one that has a powerful grip on our moral imaginations.

But back up from heroic fiction to real life for a minute. The Lone Ranger model of courage doesn't tell us what to do when our own strength isn't enough to win the day. What if we fight to protect ourselves with all the strength we've got, and still find ourselves vulnerable? Since September 11, we as a nation have had this question ringing in our ears. What if we exercise, eat well, and see the doctor regularly and still find our bodies riddled with cancer? What if we drive defensively and have a clean record, but still end up hospitalized after being hit by a drunk driver? What if we're not superheroes after all, but only their bumbling, ineffectual sidekicks who constantly need to be rescued ourselves?

Courage is necessary precisely because we are weak and vulnerable to harm, because pain and suffering are a very real part of human life. This is the way it is for us. We know that all too well after New York, after watching little children die of incurable diseases, after living long enough to see our bodies get sick, hurt, and weary. Courage cannot eliminate every threat; it cannot gain for us guarantees of safety and comfort. Courage can, however, ensure that fear and suffering don't stop us from doing good. And it can keep fear and suffering from driving us to do evil.

Especially in his moment of greatest vulnerability, Christ showed us the source of true strength—the love of God. The power of God's love far exceeds the limits of any human power, yet it can become our own. What Christ ensures for us in his dying and rising is that there will be sufficient grace for the journey, and that in the end all our tears will be wiped away (Revelation 21:4). God's power and promises give us reason to take heart.

WHY IS ENDURANCE SO DIFFICULT?

Thinking of courage as the endurance of suffering is a very old idea, even if it is a new thought for some of us today. It is also a scary idea. When faced with suffering, our instincts lead us to want to do something about it. A recent survey reported that terminally ill patients who wanted the option of physician-assisted suicide were more afraid of suffering and pain than they were of death itself.

Why is the endurance of suffering so difficult for us? Why does it occasion such intense fear? When Thomas Aquinas considers this question, he

mentions three reasons—perhaps there are more.⁶ First, we suffer and endure when we are threatened by someone or something stronger than us. Counterattack is an option when *we* are in a position of superior strength and are willing to use it, when we still have some measure of control.

We experience two emotional reactions to pains, difficulties, and threats of injury: either in fear we shrink back from them or with daring we strike out against them. Courage's job is to moderate both emotions so that the threat of evil doesn't deter us from holding fast to what is good. Both fear and daring are about something that might harm us; they differ according to the possibility of warding it off. We shrink back from evil we can't overcome; we strike out against evil we believe we can prevent or shake off. Everything depends on how our strength measures up against the threat of harm. If it is possible to keep it at bay, then we mobilize for attack. If it is not, then the task of courage is to dig in and withstand the storm.

What Aquinas's analysis reveals is that when we suffer, we suffer precisely because we are in a position of weakness. The pain is bad enough, to be sure; what makes it unbearable is the feeling of powerlessness that goes with it. We must endure pain because we cannot prevent or alleviate it.

Sometimes courage does require defending ourselves against a threat. Moreover, courage never stands idle when others are in danger or in pain. Yet courage can also uphold us when we are in a position of weakness, when we have lost control over our circumstances, or when we cannot or should not use power and force to fight back. Courage can stand firm and stand fast as well as striking out against. As Macy's parents show us, sometimes standing firm is all we are able to do. As the cross shows us, sometimes it is all we ought to be willing to do.

The second reason suffering is hard to face is that when we are able to strike back against things that hurt us, we can use anger to our advantage. Anger is a powerful emotional force that can psyche us up to overcome threats against us. What we love about the action-hero type is that he is angry enough to take on injustice and overcome it. Courage is justice's greatest ally; anger, in turn, serves as courage's toughest weapon. Anger is powerless to help us, however, when we can't fight the pain and make it go away.

When we suffer, we carry the extra burden of sorrow, the emotion we feel when evil is already here with us. Our sorrow is an additional weight to bear, and it is a burden that often threatens to undo us. The courage to suffer must therefore stand firm against sorrow inside, as well as threats from outside. This internal firmness can be as much a testimony of courage as any outward act. The martyr's resistance, despite pain and suffering, speaks boldly for justice when it says, "The truth will stand even when I fall." Even though it is marked by weeping, Macy's parents' graveside vigil

bears witness that “Love is strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6).

The last reason why the endurance of suffering is so difficult is that endurance implies suffering for a long stretch of time. As we’ve seen, when we suffer something, it is usually something beyond our control. If we *could* have warded off the threat or fixed the problem, we *would* have, and the sooner, the better. If we are powerless to do so, however, then something beside our own will is setting the terms. We don’t decide when to get Parkinson’s disease or how fast it will progress. We don’t decide to face religious persecution and for how long, nor do we know when we might have to choose between losing our job and losing our integrity, and how long our subsequent unemployment will last. We simply have to endure hardship for as long as disease and injustice hold sway.

Added to our natural disinclination for suffering over the long haul is that fact that American culture tells us to expect things to be fixed, and to be fixed without delay. Waiting is hard enough; waiting in pain is unthinkable. As a recent advertisement proclaimed, “We took ‘immediately’—and made it *faster*.” Why should we have to put up with pain? Call *now*! See your doctor *today*! In a culture dedicated to comfort and convenience, we have precious little tolerance for pain and difficulty. We feel as though we have the right to avoid it, and if not, then the right to get rid of it as quickly as possible. Especially when we have these impatient (and unrealistic) expectations, suffering can wear us down over the long haul.

WHO ARE THE COURAGEOUS?

If suffering can be a genuine expression of courage, the example of Christ also teaches us something important about *who* is capable of having this virtue. Centuries ago, Aristotle described courage in terms of battle-field action. This definition, in the world of the Greek *polis*, unapologetically disqualified women and children, the sick and disabled, the foreigner and the socially disenfranchised, from having the virtue of courage. Later, when Aquinas brought a Christian perspective to bear on this Greek formula, he deliberately shifted his model of courage from Achilles to Christ, thus opening the virtue to everyone capable of sacrificing themselves for another out of love, as Christ did. Today we, like Aristotle, prefer action heroes—those who embody the American moral ideal—who are macho men. Some of us are not men, and even among those who are, many will never be particularly macho. If courage can be expressed in the endurance of suffering, however, then it is no longer open only to those who excel in human strength and physical power. It is a virtue for all of us, even those who may never count as powerful; in fact, it may be especially available to the weak and the wounded.⁷

It is tempting to avoid suffering at all costs. It is hard to live with pain and difficulty and not be able to ‘do something about it.’ It is hard to face our own vulnerability and weakness. It is tempting to trust our own

strength or to impatiently return evil for evil. Courage is the strength to resist these temptations, to own up to the limits of our own power and control, to “love God...with all [our] might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Courage, says one author, is “nothing else than to love [the] good, in the face of injury or death,...undeterred by any spirit of compromise.”⁸

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less that we see most clearly that courage is not finally about trusting our *own* strength. Only God has the ultimate power to overcome evil. Only God has faced death down and defeated it. When our own strength is exhausted by suffering, we see most clearly that true strength is rooted in God’s power, and true courage inspired

by his love. That love has the power to hold us steadfast as we endure the pain of broken relationships, or walk through the rubble in New York City, or stand beside little Macy’s grave.

God promises us, as he promised Joshua long ago, “I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.... I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). N. T. Wright points out that, surprisingly enough, the most frequent command God gives us in Scripture is “Do not be afraid.... Fear not.”⁹ The promise to which we hold fast is God’s promise to help us stand firm against fear, and to stand with us when we are powerless to avoid suffering, so that love—not fear—has the last word in our lives.¹⁰

NOTES

1 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, I.15.

2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

3 *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manicheorum* (On the Morals of the Catholic Church), XV.25.

4 *Illustrated London News*, January 14, 1911.

5 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 93.

6 *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, qq. 123-124. See my “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11:2 (Fall 2002), 23-25, for a more extended discussion of this point.

7 Aquinas goes so far as to argue that the act most fully embodying courage is martyrdom. Does that mean courage is only for super Christian saints, instead of action-adventure superheroes? I think the opposite is true. First, even the martyrs' suffering is unlike Christ's in this respect: no human being can repeat his redemptive work on the cross. That was already done for us. Secondly, for all Christians, Aquinas argues that the fundamental moral task is to intentionally become more and more like Christ. Each day of *imitatio Christi* requires, therefore, that we reaffirm our baptism, dying to our old selves and welcoming the birth of the new, dying with Christ and like Christ in order also to rise with him (Philippians 3:7-11). As Henri Nouwen notes (*A Letter of Consolation*), suffering this daily mortification of the old self is part of the rhythm of discipleship. Laying down our lives and taking up our crosses, in this analogical but no less important sense, is a courageous task for all of those who claim Christ as their own.

8 Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 131.

9 N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1994), 56.

10 This article is a revised and expanded version of my "Courage, Weakness, and September 11," *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 17:6 (June/July 2002), 3-5. I am grateful to the editor for giving me permission to incorporate that material. The opening story is from *The Grand Rapids Press*, February 2, 2001.



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