

THE TWO SWORDS

Back in 1993 Naomi and I had joined OM and were in Cape Town getting ready to start on the Doulos. The ship had just gone into dry dock. As the water was drained out we realized that there was a harbor seal that had been trapped in the dock with us and was now stranded. In the morning they were going to bring in heavy machines to start cleaning the ship's hull and we knew the seal would not survive. I wanted to try to do something to save that seal but no one was interested in helping me. In the same dock as the Doulos was a Russian fishing ship. I went over and convinced some of the men to come and help me try and rescue the seal.

The seal had gone underneath the ship and needed to be coaxed out. It was the scariest thing I had ever done. The blocks holding up the ship were only a few feet high so I had to crouch down. I could hear the barnacles all around me snapping and the growling of the seal in the darkness. Suddenly it appeared out of the darkness and I ran for my life. It followed me out from under the ship and the Russian fishermen were there with some nets to catch it. It took 8 of us to haul it up the stairs and finally release it back into the ocean.

Why do I tell that story? The terror I felt in going under the ship was nothing compared with the joy I felt in saving the life of that seal. It was worth the risk. Today I want to talk about being a courageous Christian. Let me tell you the story of the two swords:

1 Sam 14:1 One day Jonathan son of Saul said to the young man bearing his armor, "Come, let's go over to the Philistine outpost on the other side." But he did not tell his father. 2 Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about six hundred men, 3 among whom was Ahijah, who was wearing an ephod. He was a son of Ichabod's brother Ahitub son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the LORD's priest in Shiloh. No one was aware that Jonathan had left. 4 On each side of the pass that Jonathan intended to cross to reach the Philistine outpost was a cliff; one was called Bozez, and the other Seneh. 5 One cliff stood to the north toward Micmash, the other to the south toward Geba. 6 Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few." 7 "Do all that you have in mind," his armor-bearer said. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul."

The background of this story is important. The Philistines had taken or killed all the blacksmiths in Israel. This meant that Israel did not have any weapons. They could not even sharpen a farming tool without the Philistines knowing about it.

1 Sam 13:19 Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, "Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!" 20 So all Israel went down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, mattocks, axes and sickles sharpened.

This meant that there were only two swords left in Israel.

This was an effective strategy of the enemy then, and spiritually it is an effective plan of the devil today. If you can take out the blacksmiths – the keepers and preachers of truth – then you can keep God's army weak and defeated. This was the call of the reformation – to get the Bible back into the hands of the people. It is still the call today. We need to be in God's word and sharpening our understanding of truth daily.

1 Sam 13:22 So on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them.

There were still 2 swords left in Israel. One was held by Saul and one by Jonathan. What is interesting is to see how each of these swords was used. Saul had his sword with him as he sat in comfort under the shade of the pomegranate tree along with his army. He was there because of fear. Because of fear he had failed to wait for Samuel at Gilgal and had foolishly offered the burnt offering himself. Now he and his 600 men were hiding in defeat, trying to avoid the Philistine raiding parties.

The other sword was with Jonathan. Instead of hiding he took his sword and used it to attack. He did not know if he would live or die – all that he knew was that he was tired of waiting. Jonathan shows here what courage is all about. What are the marks of a courageous Christian?

1. PEOPLE OF COURAGE GO FIRST

Courageous people take the windows of opportunity they are given and go quickly. Jonathan saw an opportunity and he went after it. He didn't wait until he had gotten approval from his father. He didn't even take the time to sit down and form a detailed battle plan. He saw an opening and responded immediately. People of Courage lead the charge. They don't wait to see what everyone else is doing.

Jonathan reminds me of a cartoon I once saw where there were two skinny old vultures sitting on a dead limb in the middle of a hot, burning desert. They sit there for a long time just waiting and waiting for something to come along and die so they could have something to eat. Finally one of them looks over at the other and says, "Forget this waiting around for something to die, let's go kill something."

I have heard it said that every baseball team could use a man who plays every position perfectly, never strikes out and never makes an error. The trouble is, there's no way to make him lay down his hot dog and come down out of the stands. So often we yell from the sidelines what the church and God should be doing but never lift a finger to do anything ourselves.

Most men live lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them -- Henry David Thoreau

A musician must make music, a builder must build, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be -- Abraham Maslow

God has placed a purpose and mission in each one of us. We will not be happy in life until we understand that purpose and live it. Remember the movie Unbreakable, or the Disney film The Incredibles. Perhaps one of the problems is that we focus way too much as Christians on not doing anything wrong and way too little on doing something right. Often the greatest tragedy we see in believers is not the sins they committed but the feats of courage they omitted.

The tragedy of life is what dies inside a man while he lives. -- Albert Schweitzer

Everyone who's ever taken a shower has had an idea. However, it's the person who gets out of the shower, dries off and does something about it who makes a difference. -- Nolan Bushnell, the founder of Atari

I am not saying that it is wrong to plan or that we should never ask for wisdom and permission.

However, I feel that sometimes we take so long in making decisions that we miss what God is doing. Sometimes "due process" and planning can be just become a cover up for fear and a sign of unbelief and cowardice. Conditions are never just right. People who delay action until all factors are favorable do nothing. Too many churches fail to do what God wants them to do because they over-plan and play it safe. They rely on their own strength and resources instead of relying upon God's power and plan.

Back in 1985 I was home from University one weekend and I read a book by Helen Roseveare who was a missionary in the Congo. That book inspired me so I ended up going to Urbana that year. I felt that God was telling me that I should go on a short term mission the next summer but when I approached my home church things did not work out. After school was over I spoke with a pastor at my new church and an opportunity opened for me but I only had a week to prepare. I decided to go.

When I arrived it seemed that everything was wrong until I found a microscope. It was only then that I realized that I was an answer to someone's prayers. It is the greatest feeling in the world to know that you are God's solution to someone else's problem. If I had played it safe I would have missed the opportunity.

My prayer for us as a church is that we will make the most of every opportunity that comes our way, that we will not miss what God has planned for us.

2. PEOPLE OF COURAGE HAVE FAITH

People of courage not only go first but they also have faith. Faith is not trying to believe something you know is not true. Faith is taking God at His word and completely trusting Him with your life. When John Paton was translating the Bible for a South Seas island tribe, he discovered that they had no word for trust or faith. One day a native who had been running hard came into the missionary's house, flopped himself in a large chair and said, "It's good to rest my whole weight on this chair." "That's it," said Paton. "I'll translate faith as 'resting one's whole weight on God.'"

Faith is Believing in advance in something that will only seem logical when seen in reverse -- Philip Yancey

Jonathon saw an open door and he walked through it. He did not know the end result of his attack. He might live. He might die. He had faith that God was with him and that God was able to give him the victory. Courage is not the absence of fear but trusting God in the face of danger.

Fear doesn't want you to make the journey to the mountain. If he can rattle you enough, fear will persuade you to take your eyes off the peaks and settle for a dull existence in the flatlands. -- Max Lucado

People of courage climb out onto the limb in faith because they understand that is where the best fruit is. When was the last time you faced with an amazing opportunity but hesitated because of fear?

Sometimes what keeps us from acting with courage is that we have been burned in the past. Failure was keeping Saul in a place of fear. It was a safe and comfortable place for him to be but it was not what God wanted. Faith is taking the chance and moving forward even in the face of disappointment and doubt.

One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally he decided the animal was old and the well needed to be covered up anyway, it just wasn't worth it to retrieve the donkey. So he invited all his neighbors to come over and help him. They all grabbed a shovel and began to shovel dirt into the well. At first, the donkey realized what was happening and cried horribly. Then, to everyone's amazement, he quieted down. A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well and was astonished at what he saw. With every shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He would shake it off and take a step up. As the farmer's neighbors continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Pretty soon, everyone was amazed as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted off! Life is going to shovel dirt on you, all kinds of dirt. The trick to getting out of the well is to shake it off and take a step up. Each of our troubles is a stepping stone. We can get out of the deepest wells just by not stopping, never giving up! Shake it off and take a step up!

3. PEOPLE OF COURAGE INSPIRE OTHERS

It says here that Jonathon did not attack the outpost alone but that his armor bearer went with him. The armor bearer was not just following Jonathan because he had to. It says that He told Jonathan that he was with him heart and soul. I love that! We are given no description of the armor bearer. We do not know if he was thin or fat, tall or short. The only thing that we are told is that he was YOUNG, and I think that is significant.

There is a generation of young people all around us who are watching us. They are looking at our lives to see if we are actually living out the truth we profess. They don't only want to hear the truth but they want to live the truth. They are inspired by courage.

Three military recruiters showed up to address some high school seniors. Graduation was only a few months away, and the recruiters were there for the obvious -- to articulate to these graduating young men and women some of the options that military service would provide them. The meeting was to last forty-five minutes. Each recruiter--representing Army, Navy, and Marine Corps--was to have fifteen minutes. Well, the Army and Navy recruiters got carried away. When it came time for the Marine to speak, he had two minutes. So he walked up with two minutes to make his pitch. He stood utterly silent for a full sixty seconds -- half of his time. Then he said this: "I doubt whether there are two or three of you in this room who could even cut it in the Marine Corps. I want to see those two or three immediately in the dining hall when we are dismissed." He turned smartly and sat down. When he arrived in the dining hall, those students interested in the Marines were a mob. They acted without delay.

The Marine recruiter was successful because he appealed to the heroic dimension in every heart. Our young people want to be challenged. They respond to vision.

One of the most effective advertisements ever written appeared in a London newspaper earlier in this century. It read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." The ad was written by Sir Ernest Shackleton, explorer of the South Pole. Regarding response, Shackleton said, "It seemed as though all the men in Great Britain were determined to accompany us."

If there is one thing upon earth that mankind loves and admires better than another, it is a brave man -- a man who dares look the devil in the face and tell him he is the devil. -- James Garfield

Story of the mother being robbed. She got back more than what was taken. She went to the court when the young man was charged to say that she forgave him and was praying for him. The judge showed grace because the mom forgave him. The granddaughter saw this whole thing and her heart was touched.

It took faith for us as a family to move back to Kuwait. I knew it would be difficult but the alternative was disobedience. Is that what I want my children to see? I want my children to see courage in me. How about you? Do you have a courageous heart? Are you showing those around you what it means to have courageous faith in the midst of trials and courageous joy in the midst of sorrow.

If I falter, push me on. If I stumble, pick me up. If I retreat, shoot me – motto of the French Foreign Legion

In the coming year where does God want to you move? Is there a stronghold or outpost that you need to be attacking in your life? For some of you maybe that may mean a habit or addiction that has been controlling your life. This is the year to courageously assault that issue and defeat it. Take the Sword of power given you and move forward!

For some, you have been spending way too much time resting under the Pomegranate tree. For one reason or another you gave up the fight. You chose the safe path, the comfortable way. It is time to get up and step out in faith and courage. God has given you a Sword. Use it.

It is not the critic who counts, not the person who points out where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the devotions, and spends himself or herself in a worthy cause; who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and at the worst, at least fails while daring greatly; so that his or her place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat. --
Theodore Roosevelt

God has been so good to us as a church. We have this large building. We have a wonderful congregation. We have a long heritage of faith and outreach in this community. We have the word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit within us. We have a sword. The question is this; what will we do with the sword we have been given. Will we keep it to ourselves, resting in the shade of the pomegranate tree, or will we use it to attack the enemy strongholds that are around us?