

Exodus 33:12–17 (CEB)

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “Look, you’ve been telling me, ‘Lead these people forward.’ But you haven’t told me whom you will send with me. Yet you’ve assured me, ‘I know you by name and think highly of you.’ ¹³ Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people.”

¹⁴ The LORD replied, “I’ll go myself, and I’ll help you.”

¹⁵ Moses replied, “If you won’t go yourself, don’t make us leave here. ¹⁶ Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth.”

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I’ll do exactly what you’ve asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name.”

1 Kings 22:13–17 (CEB)

¹³ Meanwhile, the messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Listen, the prophets all agree that the king will succeed. You should say the same thing they say and prophesy success.”

¹⁴ But Micaiah answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, I will say only what the LORD tells me to say.”

¹⁵ When Micaiah arrived, the king asked him, “Micaiah, should we go to war with Ramoth-gilead or not?”

“Attack and win!” Micaiah answered. “The LORD will hand it over to the king!”

¹⁶ But the king said, “How many times must I demand that you tell me the truth when you speak in the name of the LORD?”

¹⁷ Then Micaiah replied, “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd! And then the LORD said: They have no master. Let them return safely to their own homes.”

Acts 5:27–32 (CEB)

²⁷ The apostles were brought before the council where the high priest confronted them:

²⁸ “In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man’s death.”

²⁹ Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than humans! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.

³¹ God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and savior so that he could enable Israel to change its heart and life and to find forgiveness for sins. ³² We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Sometimes commitment takes courage . . . a lot of it!

In the mid-50’s John F. Kennedy and his speechwriter, Ted Sorenson, wrote *Profiles in Courage*, which looked at the stories of eight U. S. Senators who defied their party and their constituents to do what they thought right. The Bible is filled from end to end with stories of courage. I suppose that is how it must be. In a world given over to sin, committing to God’s way and sticking to it takes real bravery. So this week, we have three stories of courage.

Moses dares

While Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever. So chilling in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,¹ they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks ago!

God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel's sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone. But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

But that isn't the end of it. The people will live but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God's holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. A foremost Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, reflects on this in his commentary:

Moses' performance in vv. 12–18 is a model for daring, insistent prayer. He prays with enormous *chutzpah*, and is prepared to crowd God in insistent ways. First, he asks to know *God's ways*. Then he insists on the *face as accompaniment*. Finally, he asks to see the *glory*. Moses refuses to let God determine the limits of asking. This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is characteristically too deferential.²

Perhaps Moses' courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God's nature. Like Moses, prayer should sustain our commitment to God and his purposes. But that prayer must be genuine and grounded in the deeply faithful relationship God desires to have with each of us, a relationship to which we can bring all our hopes and all our fears.

Micaiah stands strong

1 Kings 22 tells the story of a little-known prophet. At the time (860BC or so), King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were trying to drive the Arameans out of Ramoth-Gilead, southeast of the Sea of Galilee. When Ahab calls his prophets together, all four hundred of them, to ask them if he will be successful in the battle, they all reply "Yes! The Lord will hand it over to the king!" But Jehoshaphat asks if there isn't another prophet they could ask (as if 400 isn't enough already!). Ahab tells him there is such a man, Micaiah, but he never has anything good to say to Ahab. Nonetheless, he is summoned and asked the same question. Micaiah responds just as did the other 400 prophets; he had been warned and told to agree with them. But the king suspects that Micaiah isn't being forthright and demands the truth.

So Micaiah reveals two visions, both of which say the same thing – Ahab will lose and even die there. Indeed, in a troubling turn of the story, it seems that God put a lying spirit into the 400 prophets so that Ahab would be persuaded to go into battle and, hence, be killed.

¹ This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

² Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 942). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

This is the barest telling of the story and I invite you to read it all in 1 Kings 22. There are a lot of issues raised, such as the lying spirit, but our focus is on Micaiah's courage. This is a story of 400 yes-men and one brave soul who will tell the king the truth. We'd like to think that Micaiah's bravery is rewarded, but, instead, he is sent to the prison where he will be held on minimum rations until Ahab safely returns. As Micaiah is hauled from the room, he shouts back over his shoulder, "If you return safely from the battle, the Lord wasn't speaking through me! Listen . . . every last one of you!" That is the last we hear of Micaiah, for, yes, despite his precautions, the infamous Ahab dies in the battle.

Obeying God first

First it had been Peter and John. Seized by the temple guards, imprisoned, and hauled before the Jewish Council to be questioned. Peter, especially, had preached the Good News of Jesus Christ boldly time after time. Happily, there had been so much public support for the two men that they had been quickly released.

But now things had turned more sinister. The priests and their allies had begun to harass all the apostles, going so far as to seize them and throw them in cells, just as they had Peter and John earlier. But then, during the night, an angel threw open the jail doors and the apostles returned to their work of proclamation. When the Jewish Council convened in the morning, it was soon discovered that the apostles were long gone. So the guards were sent out yet again to round up the apostles and bring them before the Council.

When the High Priest demanded that the apostles cease their teaching and preaching, Peter replied on behalf of all the apostles "We must obey God rather than humans!" And there you have it – how could he choose otherwise? Christians across the globe have had to confront just such a choice for two millennia and many do still today. Peter rightly and bravely chooses God's path. He knows what Jesus told them to do. He has experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And he knows what sort of authority he stands before:

"In Acts, Peter's response is toward a particular kind of political authority, carefully drawn by the narrator. Hostile, unrepentant, tyrannical, envious, clearly unfit to lead the people, who seem to recognize what the narrator does! In our worlds, political authority is rarely so sharply drawn, and a response like Peter's is rarely so glibly made. Such defiance is possible only with several qualifications. In Acts, Peter's comment introduces *kerygma*, gospel. That is, his expression of civil disobedience does not serve political but rather missionary ends. He does not define himself or his religious authority in terms of protest but as a witness to God's salvation of Israel. He is not the leader of a movement of protest but a movement of God.³

What comes of Peter's courageous stance? One of the most highly respected rabbis of the day steps forward to speak; Gamaliel urges caution. If this movement is not of God, then it will fade away on its own, not requiring any help from the Council. But if it is from God, then who are they, the Council, to stand in God's way. The Jewish leaders heed Gamaliel and let the apostles go . . . after beating them.

And what did the apostles do? They went right back to proclaiming the good news in every place they could find. For this movement was, and is, most certainly of God!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Working on this week's topic made me think of a book of essays Hugh Hewitt published several years ago, *The Embarrassed Believer*. Hewitt tells his own story of embarrassment at times. It isn't that he was embarrassed by Jesus; Hewitt is a

³ Wall, R. W. (1994–2004). The Acts of the Apostles. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10, pp. 108–109). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

committed believer. But he felt pressured by a culture that wanted him to keep his beliefs private, or at least amorphous and ambiguous. Here is his scale of religious terms from “easy-to-say” to “hard-to-say” in public: “spirituality>belief system>religion>faith>the divine>God>Lord>the Spirit>the Holy Spirit>Christ>Jesus>my savior.” The more specific, the more difficult. As Hewitt put it, “It is one thing to believe. It is another thing to be hooted at for belief.” He pointed out prayer-in-restaurants as another dilemma. Granted, he lives in California. But I suspect that even here in the so-called Bible Belt, we are not immune to these pressures and feelings.

2. Hewitt goes on to talk about how we can shed this fear of scorn or embarrassment, but he names a problem that I think many Christians have felt to one degree or another. Have you ever felt this way? Why do you think that Christians sometimes feel this way? Make a list of five specific reasons that a believer might feel embarrassed. (Remember Peter’s denial of Jesus if all this makes you feel too guilty.) Have you overcome this fear? If so, how did you do it? If not, how might you go about it? How can we help each other with this? What are some simple steps we could take to make ourselves bolder? Maybe saying grace in restaurants is a good place to start – particularly if it makes us uncomfortable!

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More stories of courage

Monday, Genesis 18:16-33 Abraham bargains with God over Sodom and Gomorrah.

Tuesday, 1 Samuel 17 Young David confronts Goliath.

Wednesday, 1 Kings 18 Alone among men, Elijah confronts hundreds of pagan priests on the slopes of Mt. Carmel.

Thursday, Haggai 2:1-5 The prophet brings God’s words of encouragement to Zerubbabel and all the people: take courage and set about your task.

Friday, Luke 22:39-53 Jesus prays for another way forward, a path other than the cross – but he presses ahead on the path of faithfulness.

Saturday, Acts 7 Stephen refuses to bend to the will of the Jewish Council.

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own.

This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series – *Spring Training: Some Theological Curveballs*