



"Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."

—G.K. Chesterton

15-Nov-13

Fear Not (Part One)

Last year, my wife and I went to Shipshewana, Indiana, a town with a large Amish population, and while there, we took a tour of the Menno-Hof museum, which recounts Mennonite/Amish history. In one part of the museum was an area dedicated to men and women that the Amish claim as their fathers and mothers in the [faith](#). We knew little about the background of the people the museum highlighted, but some of them may be the same ones that we claim as our spiritual ancestors. Some of them may have been true [Christians](#).

One person's story, that of a man named Dirk Willems, struck a chord with me. Wikipedia has a similar account:

Willems . . . was baptized as a young man, thus rejecting the infant [baptism](#) practiced at that time by both Catholics and established Protestants in the Netherlands. This action, plus his continued devotion to his new faith and the baptism of several other people in his home, led to his condemnation by the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and subsequent arrest. Willems was held in a residential palace turned into a prison, from which he escaped

using a rope made out of knotted rags. Using this, he was able to climb out of the prison onto the frozen moat. A guard noticed his escape and gave chase. Willems was able to traverse the thin ice of a frozen pond . . . because of his lighter weight after subsisting on prison rations. However the pursuing guard broke through the ice yelling for help as he struggled in the icy water.

Willems did not spend a lot of time in thinking about self-preservation, and remembering the admonition from [Jesus](#) to "[love](#) our enemies" and to "do good for those that spitefully use and persecute you," turned and saved the drowning man. The guard wanted to let him go but a superior officer warned him that, if he did, the guard would take Willem's place in prison. Faced with that prospect, the guard recaptured him and brought him back to the castle, where he was imprisoned, tortured, and ultimately burned at the stake.

Notice [Revelation 21:7-8](#):

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his [God](#) and he shall be My son. But the *cowardly*, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and [all liars](#) shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the [second death](#). (Emphasis ours.)

"Cowardly" certainly does not describe Dirk Willems and his bravery, but it does fit the story of Private Eddie Slovik, who was executed for desertion in World War II. Although he declined to speak in his own defense at trial, Slovik willingly admitted to "desertion to avoid hazardous duty," which is the classic definition of cowardice. To fill in the background, Wikipedia notes:

The 28th Division was scheduled to begin an attack in the Hurtgen Forest [on the German-Belgian border]. The coming attack was common knowledge in the unit, and casualty rates were expected to be very high, as the prolonged combat in the area had been unusually grueling. The Germans were determined to hold, and terrain and weather reduced the usual American advantages in armor and air support to almost nothing. A small minority of soldiers (less than 0.5%) indicated they preferred to be imprisoned

rather than remain in combat, and the rates of desertion and other crimes had begun to rise.

Because of this, the top military commanders felt that they needed to set an example for others. Slovik was sentenced to death after being found guilty by nine officers at his court martial. His division commander, Major General Norman Cota, stated, "Given the situation as I knew it in November, 1944, I thought it was my duty to this country to approve that sentence. If I hadn't approved it—if I had let Slovik accomplish his purpose—I don't know how I could have gone up to the line and looked a good soldier in the face."

Private Slovik was offered opportunity after opportunity to reconsider his choice, and even though he was warned of the consequences of his choice, he apparently did not take the warnings seriously. He is reported to have stated, "I've made up my mind, I'll take my court martial." During World War II, 21,000 men were given varying sentences for desertion, but of the 49 men sentenced to death, only Private Slovik's sentence was carried out.

It is interesting to realize what happened to Private Slovik's body after his execution: He was buried in a cemetery in France, the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery and Memorial, alongside other men convicted of rape and/or murder. Slovik's remains were interred in an area known as Plot E, which is also the burial place of 93 other American servicemen executed under military authority for crimes of murder and/or rape during World War II. This small area, separated from the main cemetery in a thick forest and enclosed by hedges, can be accessed only through the back door of the superintendent's office. The stone grave markers in Plot E are small, about the size of one's hand, and are engraved with black sequential numbers, making the individual graves impossible to identify without a key.

These military criminals were made to lie in obscurity, just as the sinners against whom God executes judgment in Revelation 21 will be totally extinguished and forgotten. [Psalm 37:20](#) in the New International Version reads, "But the wicked will perish: The LORD'S enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish—vanish like smoke." Their crimes are such a shame that they will no longer be remembered.

It is intriguing that in [Revelation 21:7-8](#), God also includes the cowardly right alongside murderers and sexually immoral, among other sinners. Moreover, *Vine's Expository Dictionary* posits that the fearful are listed first in the list of the transgressors as the *worst* of the offenders who will meet their ends in the second death. Cowardice is a serious [sin](#)!

Private Slovik was the only American soldier executed for cowardice during World War II and the first since the Civil War. Many people are shocked that our country would execute a man for being a coward, but Revelation 21 says that the God of justice *and mercy* will also put some to death for cowardice. So, whether we think of ourselves as more of a Barney Fife than a John Wayne, we need to ask, "What can we do to avoid being a coward, when it matters most?" We look into this more in Part Two.

- John Reiss

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Becoming Fearless](#)

by Mark Schindler

Mark Schindler, reflecting upon his experiences with blood clots in the bladder, heart, and lungs, knew God was in charge of the outcome of all of these life-threatening problems. Ultimately, God healed him of these afflictions. Later, when it was determined that he had a brain tumor, he again concluded that God was in charge of the outcomes, determining to face these trials with boldness and faith, displacing fear and timidity. When Job was afflicted with a plethora of physical problems, he learned that God was using these afflictions to perfect him. The afflictions that we are going through are intended to bind us together. We must battle the deadly and contagious enemies of fear and timidity, realizing that God is in charge of the inevitable consequences and has provided a pattern of faith and courage with the example of our Trailblazer, Jesus Christ, having been perfected through the things He had suffered.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Elements of Motivation \(Part One\): Fear](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Even though a Christian's potential in God's Kingdom is so wonderful, it is still necessary for God to motivate His children to reach it. John Ritenbaugh begins his series on Christian motivation by expounding the fear of God.

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