



"To know that nothing happens in God's world apart from God's will may frighten the godless, but it stabilizes the saints."

—J.I. Packer

22-Nov-13

Fear Not (Part Two)

As Part One concluded, we were considering the fact that, despite our society's general squeamishness about executing cowardly deserters, [God](#) has declared that He will cast the cowardly into the Lake of Fire ([Revelation 21:7-8](#)). This should give us pause because few of us are the kind of people who "run to the sound of the guns." For most of us, we have sometimes been brave, but perhaps many other times we have been timid and fearful. So what can we do to avoid being a coward when it matters most?

We will start with a definition. *Webster's American Dictionary* defines a *coward* as "a person who shows shameful lack of courage or fortitude." *Fortitude* is "mental and emotional strength in facing adversity, danger, or temptation courageously." The root of the word "coward" derives from the Latin word *coe*, which means "tail." Obviously, it comes from the common sight of an animal "turning tail" and fleeing "with its tail between its legs," metaphorical expressions still in use today. An Old English word for "cowardly" was *earg*, which also meant "slothful." This brings to mind [Matthew 25:24-30](#), where the slothful servant (KJV; the NKJV calls him "lazy") is sentenced to "outer darkness" for failing to carry out the job that he was given to do. The servant justified his lack of action, saying, "I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground" ([Matthew 25:25](#)).

Examples of cowardice are found throughout the Bible. The first is that of Adam and Eve, who hid themselves from God, and then, after he was caught, Adam attempted to shift the blame for his actions onto his wife. As the old joke goes, "Adam blamed Eve; Eve blamed the serpent; and the serpent, well, he didn't have a leg to stand on." Later, both Abraham and [Isaac](#) called their wives their sisters to save their skins. In Moses' day, the ten spies sent into Canaan were afraid to challenge the inhabitants of Canaan, and their cowardly actions dispirited the whole nation.

The New Testament contains examples of cowardice too: the parents of the blind man whose sight was restored feared the Jews, the rich young ruler feared the loss of his wealth, the disciples feared the storm on the sea; and of course, the Peter denied [Jesus](#) rather than die with him as he had pledged. In Galatia, Peter and others played hypocrites because of fearing the church's Jewish leadership ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)).

The common thread of all of these occurrences is self-preservation; we all want to continue as we are without sacrificing anything. But God owns us heart and soul, and because of that fact, we need to consider the end toward which God is leading us. Jesus says in [Matthew 16:25](#), "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." Jesus set us the perfect example of self-sacrifice and boldness, as His crucifixion was only the culmination of a lifelong example of dedication and sacrifice. So we, too, must deny ourselves and follow Him regardless of the cost to us ([Matthew 10:39](#)).

An old adage says, "Sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny." Human experience shows that it is generally true. If a person does something repeatedly, even if at first it is against his will, it will become a habitual practice, especially if it turns out to be a pleasurable experience. If the person continues in his habit until it becomes a necessity to him, it will engrave itself on his character, and at that point, his destiny is pretty much set. So it is with cowardice, running away in fear of hard choices and sacrifice. We cannot allow fear and flight to become our necessary, habitual reactions to difficult situations lest it become set in our characters.

As we have seen, cowardice is related to self-preservation, laziness, faithlessness, and the wrong kind of fear. In [I Corinthians 16:13](#), Paul exhorts us, "Watch, stand fast in the [faith](#), be brave, be strong." [Deuteronomy 11:8](#) informs us that being strong comes from being obedient to God's commandments. [Moses](#) exhorts the Israelites in [Deuteronomy 31:6](#), "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." Paul encourages us in [Ephesians 6:10-17](#) to take the steps now to dress ourselves with the proper battle gear so that, when we must face the enemy, we will be ready to stand rather than run.

Another old saying, this one more jocular, runs, "All is not lost. If nothing else, you can always be a bad example." Private Eddie Slovik, the cowardly deserter discussed in Part One, had an obligation to do his duty, and although he may have been only one out of 21,000 people that failed in this, he was the one chosen to serve as a bad example for others. We have been warned that much is required of those who have been given much ([Luke 12:48](#)). We need to take God's warnings seriously! We too have obligations; there is no escaping our duty, and we definitely do not want to become the bad example, the watchword, that others will sadly shake their heads at.

Job complains, "For the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me" ([Job 3:25](#)). Justifiably or not, Eddie Slovik was afraid of death, and his failure to overcome this fear resulted in this curse coming to pass on him. He will yet have his chance to overcome in the resurrection, but as it says in [I Peter 4:17](#), judgment is on the church now. We need to take stock of those things that we "greatly fear," and consider if, since God is with us, our fears are truly justified. Then, if we still fear, we should take steps to face and conquer it.

Paul writes in [Romans 8:18](#) that no trial is so bad as to compare to what we have ahead of us if we overcome. He adds in [I Corinthians 2:9](#), "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." If we follow the good example of Dirk Willems rather than bad example of Private Slovik, we will be well-recompensed for our obedience, sacrifice, and witness in the resurrection.

As [Joshua 1:9](#) encourages us as we stand on the borders of our Promised Land, "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." We never need to be afraid to do the right thing.

- John Reiss

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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