

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Christian Courage

2 Timothy 1:1-7

"Home of the Brave." That's the message on a large sign as you pass by the hospital in LaPlata. Similar signs have been posted at many facilities in the University of Maryland Medical System. This year, the system decided to fold Nurses Week and Hospital Week into a single celebration of Health Care Heroes Week. It's one way to recognize the dedication of the system's workforce during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, both frontline workers and those behind the scenes. COVID-19 has awakened us to the selflessness and bravery that so many healthcare workers have been exhibiting during this crisis.

Like healthcare workers, folks in other essential yet easily overlooked occupations have acted selflessly and sacrificially, demonstrating their own form of bravery and courage. Policemen, firefighters, EMTs, grocery clerks, janitors, security officers, and numerous others didn't necessarily have the choice of staying at home. Their jobs couldn't be done remotely. They needed to be on site, hands on, face to face, which meant a higher level of risk and danger.

Courage has been on display in all sorts of ways during this pandemic. Instead of shrinking back, individuals have stepped forward and done what needed to be done for the wellbeing of others and the greater good. And when it comes to courage, we look to the Scriptures for understanding and guidance. We want to know more about what it looks like to be courageous followers of Jesus at a time when there's so much fear and anxiety.

One piece of Scripture that I hear quoted a lot during the current crisis in 2 Timothy 1:7: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." Or as another version renders it: "For God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control."

It's one of those verses that makes for memorizing and merchandizing. You can get it framed and hang it on the wall of your home. You can get it printed on a mug, a T-shirt, or a wristband. You can get it imprinted on greeting cards and bookmarks. A whole range of items can be used to publicize and proclaim this piece of Scripture. "For God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control."

Like all cases where we pluck one verse out of the Bible and use it to make a point, we need to pay attention to how this verse fits into its larger context. It's the conclusion of the opening section of Paul's letter. Paul is greeting and commending Timothy, with whom he has a special relationship in the work of the gospel. Here we have an older apostle writing to a young pastor. Paul thinks of Timothy as his spiritual offspring, his beloved child. At the same time, Paul acknowledges Timothy's biological descent. He mentions Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, recognizing the role they have played in Timothy's faith. Clearly Timothy comes from a solid spiritual heritage.

But he still has a lot of room to grow in his faith. Paul gets precise by calling upon Timothy to remember his own story, the story of how he came to faith in Christ and entered the ministry of the gospel. Paul says to him, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (v. 6). It's hard to tell exactly what Paul is talking about here. He seems to be referring to some sort of spiritual giftedness that Timothy had received through Paul's ministry. Whatever the details, it's clear that Paul wants Timothy to remember that there's a connection between what happened back then and what's happening now. In other words, Amen to the fact that Timothy had once received the Holy Spirit. But Timothy, don't let that fire go out. In fact, says Paul, "fan into flame the gift of God." Paul uses the image of a campfire kept going for days on end, a fire that needs to be fanned into fresh flame every morning. Immediately after using this illustration, Paul concludes his greeting, "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."

Essentially, Paul is exhorting Timothy to nurture and cultivate the life of the Spirit. And one of the qualities of life in the Holy Spirit is courage. Paul isn't speaking of courage primarily in the sense of a human capacity to muster up boldness and strength in the face of opposition. He's not telling Timothy to reach deep down within himself to find the bravery that he needs in order to stick with the ministry. Boldness and bravery are important, but Paul isn't pushing a certain kind of temperament, mentality, or ability here. He's talking about the Spirit, the personal presence of God in Timothy's life, enabling him to stand strong and persevere in the way of the gospel.

This is part of why we spend so much time in the life of the church talking about encouraging one another. As the word itself indicates, we need to be filled with courage. We need to restore one another's courage, on a regular basis, through worship, study, fellowship, and service. Our experience over the past two months, especially our inability to come together physically as a congregation, has been a reminder of how much our gatherings are a means of giving and receiving the courage that sustains us in the life of faith. Thankfully we've been able to utilize all sorts of other means and methods for staying in touch and remaining connected. But even in cyberspace, our stamina in the way of Christ comes from the Holy Spirit given to us by God.

Fay Angus has written: "If there are two words that should be said in the same breath and said regularly to ventilate our hope, that should be flamed together, branded as a signature of our faith, they are the words 'faith' and 'courage.' It takes courage to believe, and in order to have that courage, we must believe."¹ Paul reminds Timothy, and us, that we must keep on believing, that we must keep on fanning our faith into fresh flame through the work of the Spirit in us, so that our lives exhibit faith not fear.

That's another expression that many believers have voiced a lot during the coronavirus pandemic. "Faith not fear." Different people mean different things by it. When I say faith, I don't mean it in the extreme sense to which some people take it. Faith doesn't mean being reckless or careless in the midst of widespread infectious disease. Faith doesn't mean that if you're a believer, you're somehow immunized against the coronavirus. Faith doesn't mean ignoring the science, the data, or the guidance from public health experts and political officials. True, our ultimate hope is in the Lord, and the Lord alone. But the discoveries and the resources available to us through medical science, and the proper exercise of governing authority, can be part of God's sovereign care and provision for us as human beings.

When I hear the expression "faith not fear," I call to mind a Facebook group that sprang up under that name. The group's idea was for folks to build crosses and put them in their front yards, then post photos of their crosses online. The crosses are intended to be a sign of

hope, a visible testimony to walking by faith rather than living in fear. Whatever we can do to keep our focus on God's faithfulness, displayed most of all in the death of Jesus, will go a long way toward keeping faith and fear in proper relationship.

We need to recognize that fear and faith can both be present at the same time. There are many things about COVID-19 that we should fear. The sickness, suffering, and death that it has brought and is still bringing to individuals, families, communities, nations, and the world. The damage it has done to economies and to millions of lives. In one respect, we're right to fear the coronavirus. That's a natural and normal and appropriate reaction to something like this. Fear can actually be a healthy kind of thing when it leads us to take the kind of action necessary to protect ourselves and others, and to promote the greater good.

But that's different from living daily lives in which our attitudes and actions are dictated and dominated by fearfulness, rather than lives marked primarily by faithfulness. Maybe there's more to it than just faith not fear. Maybe it's more about faith over fear, or faith greater than fear, or faith that outlasts fear. I realize that no phrase is perfect, and any expression can be taken and used for harmful or helpful purposes. I'm just trying to get at the fact that we need to face and wrestle with our fears, but always within the bigger picture of cultivating and deepening our faith in the Lord. We can be honest with ourselves about the dangers in life and still trust that God's in control, and live like he's in control. That's really the foundation of Christian courage.

So let's return to our text and look at three aspects of Christian courage. Remember that we're not talking about ways that we, in and of ourselves, can exhibit boldness and bravery. Rather, we're talking about ways that the Holy Spirit works in us and through us to display the way of Christ. Again, verse 7 says, "For God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control." First of all, then, we see that the Spirit supplies us with power. This is power, not so much in the sense of authority, but in the sense of God's enabling strength. In order to promote the gospel, in word and deed, we can't start with our own willpower and determination. Instead, we have to start with honesty about our own inability, and with confidence in God's capability. COVID-19 may be intimidating and strong, but God is still mighty to save. So whatever fears and anxieties you face, face them with confidence in the life-giving power of God in Christ.

And as you rely upon the strength of God in Christ, don't lose sight of the love that drives it. In our key verse, love is the second aspect of Christian courage. After all, power is one thing, but power grounded in love and guided by love is another. The Holy Spirit supplies us with power and produces love to govern how we use it. This means that the power we have in Christ is to be used selflessly not selfishly. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ himself, who gave himself for us, revealing God's love to us. So if our faith in Jesus Christ means that the Holy Spirit is given to you and to me, then we'll show it by the way we lay down our lives for the gospel, giving ourselves away rather than preserving ourselves at all costs. G. K. Chesterton said, "Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live, taking the form of a readiness to die." He goes on to quote the words of our Lord: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:25).

The ways that we turn loose of our lives and lay them down for the sake of Christ are signs that our lives are properly focused. That's the third aspect of Christian courage. In today's key verse it's called self-control. The Greek term behind it is hard to pin down. Its meaning includes a range of ideas such as prudence, moderation, discretion, and self-discipline. In other words, having a measure of control over your thinking and actions, maintaining a balanced outlook on whatever situation you face. We could probably also

describe it as levelheadedness. No matter what the circumstances, staying focused on the power and love of Christ enables you to persevere in life, especially in a time like the present.

These are days that call for Christian courage, generated by the Holy Spirit at work in us. Courage that's grounded in the faithfulness of God. Courage that moves us into sacrificial action for the good of others. Courage that helps us persevere in our witness for the gospel. "For God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control."

¹ Fay Angus, *Running Around in Spiritual Circles*. *Christianity Today*, Vol, 36. No. 5.