

“Be Strong and of Good Courage”

Commentary for January 12, 2008 — Do Not Fear Life’s Challenges

Below is a short but important article under the same title by Dr. Ernest L. Martin in October 1976 where it was published in “The Foundation Commentator,” a publication of the Foundation for Biblical Research. Dr. Martin was Director of FBR at that time.

The primary source for this article was a book by Samuel Smiles titled *Character* (London: John Murray, 1876), the majority of which is available on the internet (click on the link of the title above), courtesy of Google Books.

The biblical quotations have been enlarged to expand their context both to clarify Dr. Martin’s point and the original intent of the passage.

David Sielaff, Editor

The world is both a beautiful place and a hostile one. It has its glories and its horrors. It is good and bad. God created it that way — and it was done for man’s ultimate benefit! Yet we are instructed to **“be strong and of good courage.”**¹ This in spite of the fact that all creation was made subject to vanity:

“For the creature [creation] was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him [God] who has subjected the same in hope, Because the creature [creation] itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now.”

• *Romans 8:20–22*

And amazingly, that “vanity” of verse 20 is the same type of futility in which God commanded Christians not to walk. The **“Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their minds”** (Ephesians 4:17, the Greek word for “vanity” is the same in both texts.)

“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, [1] Having the understanding darkened, [2] being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness [hardness] of their heart: Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned [the] Christ.”

• *Ephesians 4:17–20*

Why Such a World?

Why has God made the world in such a condition? The answer is plain: because mankind has something to learn from it. The hostile environment around us (and the will God gives us to

1. This phrase is repeated 11 times in the Old Testament. See Deuteronomy 31:6–7, 23; Joshua 1:6–9, 18; 10:25; 1 Chronicles 22:13; 28:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:7. See Psalm 27:14, Isaiah 35:3–4, and also Daniel 10:19 where it shows that God’s Word can give us strength to handle the evil circumstances of living. This is detailed by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:10–20 and 2 Timothy 2:1–13. *DWS*

cope with it) can develop strength, courage, resoluteness, and even love. In a word, a hostile world helps to create in us character.

The best sort of character cannot be formed without effort — working against odds, gaining victories over nature, conquering evil. Men and nations are purified and strengthened by trials. This is the means by which character can best be developed. Though a love of liberty and patriotism can do much to give people character, it is trial and suffering nobly borne that give more. It is not that we need heroes that stand out above the standard of common men. Indeed, heroic actions are often done on impulse and are not always reasoned out with careful thought. What are needed are common people to stand up for principle and to defend it.

The freedom of religion and political expression that we presently have in our democratic countries is the result of many men and women willing to sacrifice their fortunes, health, and even their own lives so that we can possess these blessings today. But freedom is really not free. It requires effort and a constant vigilance to sustain it. The hostile forces around us (and they exist even in our democratic countries) need to be opposed most vigorously. And that takes energy and determination. God expects us to do such. It is a part of the training that God wishes us to have.

God does not make it easy for us. The creation is presently in a **“bondage of corruption”** (Romans 8:21) and it **“groans and travails in pain.”** Not only does the normal creation show the evidences of affliction (continuing on in Romans chapter 8):

“but ourselves also [even we Christians], which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”

• *Romans 8:23*

The trouble with many people is that they are wedded to institutions which perpetuate slavery. They do not want to struggle against the evil. The ancient Greeks said: **“Give your child to be educated by a slave and instead of one slave, you will have two.”** But God wishes His people to be free.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”

• *Galatians 5:1*

The Preference for Security

It amazes me to see people who were free now preferring slavery over freedom. Just like the Israelites of old when the difficulties of the wilderness began to encroach upon their lives (and they found it very uncomfortable), they wanted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt (Numbers 14:1–3). True, it was a return to slavery, but that was where the comforts were — the “wealth” and “security.” **“Let us make us a captain, and let us return to Egypt”** (verse 4). Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb **“rent their clothes”** at such a suggestion (verses 5–6). **“Rebel not you against the Lord,”** was their plea (verse 9).

Perhaps, though, such actions are like the man who was in prison for twenty years and got so used to prison life that he could not cope with the responsibilities of freedom. He longed to return to the comfort of the cell.

Maybe people prefer servitude because there is security and money in the institutions of man? Napoleon was a man of great energy, but in many ways a man destitute of principle. Perhaps his estimation of men is truer than some of us would care to believe: **“Men are hogs, who feed on gold. Well, I throw them gold, and lead them whithersoever I will.”**²

2. Cited from Smiles, *Character*, p. 13. DWS

Men and women of character should not surrender their individualities for money, security, or human glory. While all people should respect the personality and opinions of others, does not God want each man to preserve his own individuality and independence?

All of us should have the courage to be personally honest and fair with man and God (though it may be unpopular to do so). To me, though, there seem to be far too many people who despise their heritage that God gives them to be His free born sons — they are only secure when the arms of other people support them.

The Bible does not countenance this concept. Paul made it quite clear that the Christian is not to be fearful of life. **“For you have not received the spirit of bondage [slavery] again to fear”** (Romans 8:15). Certainly, the world is a hostile place — God made it that way.

But it is only the slothful and the weak that complain of it. **“The slothful man says, ‘There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets’”** (Proverbs 26:13). Let the lion be there. Does that mean we are to stay indoors and not brave the fortunes of life?

Every step of progress in the history of man has been made in the face of opposition and difficulty. The good that has been achieved has been secured by men of courage and valor — by great discoverers, great patriots, and great workers in all walks of life. There is scarcely a great truth or doctrine which has not had to fight its way to public recognition in the face of detraction, abuse, and persecution. It was Heinrich Heine who said: **“Everywhere that a great soul gives utterance to its thoughts, there also is a Golgotha.”**³ That is true. No wonder our Savior said that all of us should take up our own cross [*stauros*, tree] and follow Him (Matthew 10:38).

But too many people are fearful of things in the world. “Stop the world, I want to get off,” is a common cry. This, however, shows a lack of love and respect for themselves and God.

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear has torment. He that fears is not made perfect in love.”

• 1 John 4:18

But some people are terrified concerning lack of money, health, job, the demons, and even of God Himself (Matthew 25:24–30, the parable of the talents). But should we not **“Gird up your loins like a man”** (Job 38:3) and meet the difficulties head on? Of course we should, troubles are all around us (God put them there), but He also has made a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13) and He loves us.

Is it not time that some of us quit feeling sorry for ourselves with the fortunes of life and start expressing the confidence and hope in God (and in ourselves too) that can make us profitable and respected sons of God? It is true that all of us will fail from time to time, but even failure can be (and is) for our learning. Such things are only temporary expedients which are designed to develop in us the manliness (and womanliness) that God wishes all of us to have.

What I am saying is truth. But some do not want truth after all. Truth can often make people very uncomfortable. I realize that complete truth in all spiritual things is not attainable in this life and that is why I am not disappointed when I fail to reach it. Indeed, I share the opinion of Gotthold Lessing⁴ who said:

“If the All-powerful Being, holding in one hand Truth, and in the other, the Search for Truth, said to me, ‘Choose,’ I would answer Him, ‘O All-powerful, keep for Thyself the Truth; but leave to me the search for it, which is the better for me.’”

3. Heinrich Heine quoted in Smiles, *Character*, p. 124. Heine (1797–1856) was a German poet, author and critic. *DWS*

4. Gottold Ephraim Lessing quoted in Smiles, *Character*, p. 93, note 1. Lessing was a German playwright, critic, and writer on philosophy and aesthetics. *DWS*

God has given all of us the opportunity to pursue after His Truth, and one day we will attain it. But we can all have strength and confidence in God and in ourselves as we strive to reach that Truth.

We want to see people free, independent, and resolute, having courage and love — and searching happily for the Truth. In Christ we can all obtain our goals. We should have prudence in our daily affairs, but having a terror of life and its problems should be banished from our minds. Too many people have fears of man, the environment, and are terrified of God. How can a person have a measure of happiness being in such fear?

“Have not I commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be you dismayed: for YHWH your God is with you whithersoever you go.”

• *Joshua 1:9*

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Addendum

If God disciplines us (Hebrews 12:5–11) we should accept that discipline with grace. If evil and affliction strike us we can feel free to groan, to be anxious, and to cry out to God. This is natural and normal; God made us dependent upon Him for a purpose. We are to remember always **“that we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me’”** (Hebrews 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6). We are encouraged to be courageous, not to lose heart (**“faint not”** in King James language), as the apostle Paul says, all is temporary:

“So we do not lose heart.

**Though our outer nature is wasting away,
our inner nature is being renewed every day.**

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen;

**for the things that are seen are transient,
but the things that are unseen are eternal [age-lasting].**

**For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,
we have a building from God,
a house not made with hands, eternal [age-lasting] in the heavens.**

Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked.

**For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety;
not that we would be unclothed,
but that we would be further clothed,
so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.**

**He who has prepared us for this very thing is God,
who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.**

**So we are always of good courage;
we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.”**

• *2 Corinthians 4:16–5:6*
Revised Standard Version

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