

Genesis 32: Confronting Death

By

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“So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place Mahanaim. Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. And he commanded them, saying, “Speak thus to my lord Esau, ‘Thus your servant Jacob says: “I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. “I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.” ’ ” Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”

-Genesis 32:1-6

Genesis 32 is one of the most famous passages in our Bibles. First because it is a very fantastical story where Jacob wrestles with God himself and gains the new name of “Israel” from God which becomes the name that the children of God have claimed over the millenia. Second, this account represents the most pivotal moment in Jacob’s life and both fulfills and ends his own “hero’s journey”. As we have been talking about, the writer of Genesis has intentionally described the events of Jacob’s life in the format of the classic hero’s journey that we see repeated throughout almost all adventure stories, both ancient and contemporary, and that we see ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. While this account doesn’t end Jacob’s story altogether, it does represent the end of this pattern that Jacob has been embodying. Thus far, Jacob has received the call to adventure when he left his parents house, he has encountered beauty, love, and malevolence, and shaped each of these encounters into a positive transformation of his character, he has received the call to return to the home of his father, and now he is learning to willingly confront death.

In most stories, the hero is unable to fulfill his destiny, usually because he lacks maturity or courage, and he only becomes the true hero when he bravely confronts his own mortality. And it is in a strange mystery that at the moment when all hope seems lost, and the hero seems to have utterly failed, that the tables turn and the hero achieves his ultimate victory. We see this throughout the Bible, like in the life of Moses, who tries to save the people of Israel in his own strength as a young man, but fails due to his own pride. He then lives a full life and is asked to return to Egypt in order to fulfill his calling, but denies the call due to his fear of death. It is only when he overcomes that fear that

he is able to confront the Pharaoh and lead the people of God out of slavery. But strangely, it is Pharaoh's pursuit of Moses and Israel, right when it seems like all hope is lost that the Israelites cross through the Red Sea (as a symbol of walking through death and uncertainty) and these same waters swallow Pharaoh and his army. We also see this in the life of Jeremiah, who is called to prophecy for the Lord against the wickedness of his people. In the early part of his ministry he is scared into silence, but when he reflects on his silence he says this:

"Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not."

-Jeremiah 20:9

He realized that his silence was complicity with the corruption of his nation and he could not silence the voice of his conscience which propelled him to bravely proclaim the word of God even if it could cost him his life. Finally, we see this pattern fulfilled in Christ. He boldly proclaims the word of God throughout His ministry, but He does this in safety knowing that His hour "had not yet come" and that the Father would preserve His life. But on the night of His crucifixion we see our Lord broken over His worry of death, which He is able to overcome and embrace the cross. And it is at this moment, when all hope seems lost, that Christ emerges from the tomb and turns the ultimate weapon of the enemy, death itself, against him and brings us all to glory.

As stated before, since this pattern is universal and fulfilled in the life of Christ, it shouldn't shock us to see this same pattern woven throughout adventure stories new and old. We can see this in the final book of the Harry Potter series, when Harry learns that the ultimate evil, Voldemort, could only be defeated if he willingly offers himself to be killed. Or in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, when Tony Stark realizes that they can't beat Thanos, (which is the Greek word for death) unless he willingly offers himself to be killed.

This pattern also has significance because it is the hero's willingness to take up the call to die that allows him to become the hero, but villains are usually created by their refusal to die. Voldemort begins his dark campaign in order to "conquer death", Darth Vader falls to the dark side because he can't accept the coming death of his wife, and Mother Gothel in Disney's "Tangled" kidnaps Rapunzel in order to avoid her death. Even in Scripture we see this. Pontius Pilate does a pretty good job defending Christ, but ends up surrendering to the mob when he fears for his own life, King Saul becomes a truly wicked man in order to "prevent" David from supplanting him, and the Pharisees

conspire against Christ because they can't die to their own ideals of who the Messiah would be and confess the folly of their religious hypocrisy.

But, as you can hopefully see from my examples, this pattern is not only expressed in the threat of death (though that is the ultimate expression of this pattern) but instead it is a call to boldly face our greatest fears, trusting our fate to God. If we can approach this pattern correctly, like Jacob, this decision will result in us further ascending in our relationship with God, but if we approach it incorrectly and give into our fears, we will find ourselves moving further away from God as well as the people that we long to become.

A Worthy Sacrifice

“And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.”

-Genesis 32:22-24

However, before we can talk about Jacob's eventual confrontation of death, I first have to point out that Jacob's fear of death is not considered bad, it is actually a part of the appropriate spirit that can rightly offer up our lives to God. This is why when our Lord was about to offer up His own life, He agonized over His fate and even sweated blood in anticipation (Luke 22:41-44). Therefore, there are two false versions of this kind of courage that can prevent us from fulfilling this pattern in a way that honors God. The first would be apathy, and the second would be bitterness.

Apathy

“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

-Ephesians 5:15-20

This is an interesting passage because Paul here exhorts us as believers to redeem the time. Meaning that there is a temptation for us to become “drunk”, which doesn't necessarily mean that we are literally drinking wine, but that we have chosen to live in a

malaise of unconsciousness. When we live in this type of apathy, we aren't necessarily hardened towards life, or embittered, but we have become indifferent towards it since we don't value it properly. In a lot of ways this form of indifference is what most children, especially young boys, struggle with. No matter how many times you warn a reckless child about the danger of an activity, they will willingly risk life and limb for seemingly no reason. This is not because the child is literally suicidal, but because they are "unconscious" of their value and don't know how to "walk circumspectly", or intentionally.

In most stories the hero begins in this type of unconscious state. They are bold, but they are also reckless and foolish. They haven't reckoned with their own mortality, nor do they have a true understanding of the value of their own lives. As such, they are fully willing to engage in behavior that could cost them their lives without a second thought, and yet, they are not heroic, but foolish. This is where Jacob starts his own journey. It was no secret that his brother was violent, reckless, and impulsive, and yet Jacob took pains to insult and upset his brother in a very public and costly fashion. This was not bravery on Jacob's part, this was recklessness.

This is why the hero has to fail at the beginning of his journey. He must come face to face with his own limitations, and he also must discover something worth living for, and therefore, something worth dying for. In most stories, including Jacob's, this takes the form of a love interest. It is only when Jacob falls in love with Rachel and becomes a father that he learns to value his own life and actually experiences fear in the proper way. Amazingly, this is why John has Jesus meet a woman at a well in John 4 as a mirror to Jacob and Moses meeting their wives at wells. This Samaritan woman acts as a symbol of Christ's union and love for His bride, the church that He would gather to Himself by facing His own death in the form of the cross.

Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy illustrates this point well. In "Batman Begins" Bruce is very bold and audacious in facing down the mob, but he is young and single and therefore his surrogate father, Alfred, is constantly worried about his reckless behavior. It is only through his love for Rachel that he begins to value his life and take his calling more seriously. But, in the second film, "The Dark Knight", Rachel is killed by the Joker, and he begins a self-destructive cycle. In the final movie "The Dark Knight Rises", he has become totally apathetic towards his own life and recklessly confronts Bane even though he is not ready. The result is that his back is broken and he is nearly killed. It is only when he is imprisoned in a pit that he recognizes his love for his city, and therefore, his love for his own life, that he is able to correctly confront his own mortality and defeat the villain.

This is also a part of my own story. For as long as I can remember I dreamed of joining the military, which I did when I turned 18. I didn't do this out of a significant bravery per se, but due to this form of apathy, I didn't truly value my own life. As a result, I was able to perform many brave actions, but I can honestly say that I wasn't truly brave at that point of my life, I was still unconscious of the worth of my own life and so I was overly casual in my decision to risk it. It is only now that I have a wife and family who I love and feel responsible for that I actually feel a sense of responsibility and truly value my life.

The big problem with the modern generation is that they are being stunted in discovering this truth by a lack of motivation. The new generation hasn't been taught to value the things that would normally give them a sense of purpose and a love for their lives. And far from the ideals of our modern society, success, wealth, knowledge, good works, and power are not the primary sources of value and purpose, so what is?

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

-1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Although our modern society recoils at this idea, we are created to love not merely to succeed or to sacrifice. This is why, in all these stories it is the prince's kiss that awakes the sleeping princess, it is love that breaks the curse. But, in order to love, we must care about things. It is almost impossible to learn this lesson in a society that teaches us that a love for country is backwards and bigoted and that marriage and family are unimportant. This philosophy has locked many young men and women in this malaise of unconsciousness and prevented them from learning this all important lesson that would give them drive, purpose, and a true care for their life. The famous Christian author and playwright Dorothy Sayers saw all of this coming decades ago and said this:

“The sixth deadly sin is named by the church acedia or sloth. In the world it calls itself tolerance; but in hell it is called despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive only because there is nothing it would die for.”

-Dorothy Sayers - “Letters to a Diminished Church”

The truth is, we are not ready to truly live, until we have found something worthy dying for. This is why when the apostle John records for us the last night of our Lord's life, he begins his description like this:

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

-John 13:1

Bitterness

The other error we can fall into is becoming bitter of our own lives. I think that story that best captures this problem is found in the life of Jonah. Jonah is called by God to prophecy to Israel's enemies, the Ninevites. Jonah, out of his great hatred for these people, avoids his calling and runs away. God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah up, and only after this does Jonah, begrudgingly, fulfill his calling. However, after he prophesies to them, his hatred for these people is so great, that he doesn't go home, but instead waits for Nineveh's destruction on a nearby cliff. As he does this, God has this exchange with him:

“And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!”

-Jonah 4:6-9

Here, Jonah is certainly ready to die, but it isn't a nobility that has prepared him for this, but a deep seeded bitterness. His hatred for the Ninevites is so powerful that he has come to despise the gift of life altogether. He is unwilling to return to his own life because he has seen no value within it. This is God's rebuke to Jonah when he says this to him:

“But the LORD said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. “And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”

-Jonah 4:10-11

Jonah has aligned himself with the philosophy of the demons. He no longer reverences life, but longs to see life ended. Unfortunately, this is a potential hazard when unrighteousness abounds. Jesus even warns of this when He says about the last days:

“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”

-Matthew 24:12

After seeing injustices increase, and godlessness go, seemingly unpunished, it is so easy for us to embrace this type of bitter resentment. Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, records a similar account for us towards the end of his book “Man’s Search for Meaning” in which he describes his own experience in the concentration camps. But after they were released he recalls an incident where a fellow survivor began to stomp through someone’s oat field, when Viktor tries to stop him, he responds like this:

“You don’t say! And hasn’t enough been taken from us? My wife and child have been gassed—not to mention everything else—and you would forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats!”

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search For Meaning”

Like Jonah, this man had miraculously survived death, but instead of becoming more reverent to life, he had become more embittered towards it. This type of bitterness is not only destructive to society, but caustic to the soul. This is why Viktor, who was also a psychiatrist, said this about this attitude:

“Only slowly could these men be guided back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them. We had to strive to lead them back to this truth, or the consequences would have been much worse than the loss of a few thousand stalks of oats.”

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search For Meaning”

Bitterness has a tendency to swallow us whole and take all joy and pleasure from us. When we seek the power to forgive, we realize very quickly that we aren’t called to forgive others for their sake, God will judge them as He sees fit with or without our forgiveness, but for our own sake. As the Proverbs teach us:

“Do not say, “I will recompense evil”; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you.”

-Proverbs 20:22

This is another lesson that I am still learning. After I came back from Afghanistan, I found that I was consumed with bitterness over the injustice that I went through. I found myself mired in my own resentment and unable to really appreciate the gift of life that God had granted me. It was only when I learned the strength to forgive the injustices of others and to entrust judgement to my God that I found peace. It is ironic, in our bitterness we think we are paying back the people who wronged us, but in reality all we are doing is destroying ourselves. While Jacob was indeed wronged, he never became bitter, and because of this, he was correctly situated to learn what it meant to offer up his life properly to God.

Wrestling With God

“Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me! And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” So He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

-Genesis 32:24-28

This part of the story carries the most weight, and yet is also incredibly perplexing. It seems as though Jacob wrestles with God, and in some way prevails over him and obtains a blessing. However, a careful reading of this passage shows us that Jacob’s “prevailing” here is not his ability to “subdue” God in some way to his will, but instead it seems as though God has finally brought Jacob to the place where he can fully submit to God, but this only happens through Jacob wrestling with him. This point becomes much more clear in the book of Hosea when Hosea comments on this account and says:

“He took his brother by the heel in the womb, And in his strength he struggled with God. Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him.”

-Hosea 12:3-4

Up until this point Jacob has been a man who has lived up to his name, he is a trickster and a usurper who has sought advantage through cunning and trickery. However, in this space he has learned to seek a blessing from God, not through trickery or through strength, but through trust. This is why Hosea includes this key detail, that Jacob “wept, and sought favor from Him.” Jacob did not subdue God, but was himself subdued to the

point of weeping. Yet still we must ask the question, in what way did Jacob prevail? The answer to this question has to do with his new identity, "Israel" which means "one who wrestles with God."

It is precisely because Jacob was a man who valued his life that he was willing to literally wrestle with God in order to preserve it. Far from condemning Jacob's struggle, God acknowledges a nobility in what Jacob has done and grants him a new identity as a result. The key here is that Jacob first valued his life enough to fight for it, but second came to understand that the only way that he would find blessing was from God Himself and not through his wiles or his strength.

Throughout this chapter though, Jacob is still struggling to understand this lesson. After Jacob learns that his brother was coming with 400 men, Jacob, understandably, panics and immediately starts plotting to mitigate the damage that Esau could do to him.

"So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape."

-Genesis 32:7-8

And yet, Jacob has also grown a lot and so he vacillates between seeking delivery through his own power and through the will of God.

"Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. "For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.' "

-Genesis 32:9-12

But when all this seems to fail, Jacob then plans on buying off his brother:

"So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants,

every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' "then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'"

-Genesis 32:13-18

To be fair to Jacob, some of what he is doing seems to be a legitimate attempt to make amends to his brother for his past trickery. Yet still another part of this is to avoid calamity through his own wisdom. While in itself, planning and wisdom can be very good things, and the Bible encourages us to be "as wise as serpents and yet as harmless as doves..." (Matthew 10:16). We must be careful with this impulse and understand that what we call "wisdom" might be a sly cover for our own cowardice and inability to trust our fate to God. C.S. Lewis described this problem well in his famous satire "The Screwtape Letters". In this book he creates a fictional dialogue between two demons trying to tempt a man away from God and at a certain point, the more junior demon is asking his uncle how to make the man more cowardly and his uncle says this:

"As to the actual technique of temptations to cowardice, not much need be said. The main point is that precautions have a tendency to increase fear. The precautions publicly enjoined on your patient, however, soon become a matter of routine and this effect disappears. What you must do is to keep running in his mind (side by side with the conscious intention of doing his duty) the vague idea of all sorts of things he can do or not do, inside the framework of the duty, which seem to make him a little safer. Get his mind off the simple rule ("I've got to stay here and do so-and-so") into a series of imaginary life lines ("If A happened — though I very much hope it won't — I could do B — and if the worst came to the worst, I could always do C")... For remember, the act of cowardice is all that matters; the emotion of fear is, in itself, no sin and, though we enjoy it, does us no good..."

-C.S. Lewis - "The Screwtape Letters"

All of Jacob's "precautions" with his brother don't buy him a second of peace. He is almost manically planning the next step towards avoiding consequences. This is why a willingness to confront our death (or our deepest fears) is such a key component to the hero's journey. Throughout our life we are either on our heels in retreat, or we are pressing forward towards what we believe to be correct. In order to do this, we are in deep need of courage. But courage is a virtue that can only be trained through a willing confrontation of fear, it can be produced no other way. And as C.S. Lewis brilliantly words it:

“...courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty, or mercy, which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky...”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Screwtape Letters”

All other virtues that God wants for us can only be practiced consistently if we are courageous. Without courage we will only do the right thing when there are no consequences or concerns. But to be truly good people, we must be able to do the right thing especially when it is hard and when our faith is pressed to its breaking point. This is why a true valuation of life is a necessary ingredient towards this step. If we don't value life, then we don't fear death, and if we don't fear death, then we can't be courageous in facing it. Notice that when Jesus faces His own mortality, He does not do this in a stoic acceptance of His fate, but He too “wrestles” with God:

“And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

-Luke 22:41-44

Some have argued that this makes Jesus seem weak and faithless because He experiences such strong anxiety. But the opposite is true. The strength of Christ is that He valued His life more than any man before Him, since He is both the author of life as well as its source. And yet, the One who was so appalled by death was willing to overcome His fears and face death for the sake of His beloved. This is true strength and courage, and this is why the people of God are named “Israel” and not merely “Islam” (which simply means “submission”). The people of God have a strange quality. We are those who love our lives enough to fight desperately for them and we strive to live them to their fullest, and yet, we are also willing to lay them down. However, the Christian is promised something interesting:

“...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

-Philippians 3:10-11

Just as Christ before us, if we can learn to willingly submit to the will of our God, to face our death well, we will be transformed and raised with Him in glory.

Death and Resurrection

“And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” So He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip in the muscle that shrank.”

-Genesis 32:26-32

The result of Jacob’s submission to God’s will and purpose for his life is that he receives a new name and a new identity. It is this principle that we celebrate in the rite of baptism. The submersion into the waters represents a death to our old selves. We willingly lose our lives, the people that we have been, for the life of Christ in us. We face our death and we rise anew in the power of our Savior. However, this same principle that works in our salvation, also works in all other areas of our life.

“Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”

-Luke 9:23-24

Christ has called His followers to understand this principle throughout our lives. We don’t just die once to ourselves in our salvation, but instead we are called to take up our crosses daily and follow after Him. The Christian must learn that this life of transformation is a life of death. It is a life in which we surrender more and more to the will of God for our lives. That we learn to pray with open submission to our Father in heaven who loves us. This is the daily call of every believer and it is why the famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who himself gave his life to fight the tyranny of the Nazi’s said this:

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy

life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

This is the faith that we hold. Not a life in which God grants to us all that we wish, but that we might come before our Father in heaven and learn to die to ourselves so that we may live for Him. This is why Jacob is never given a clear answer from God about what would happen to him. God promises to prosper Jacob and his descendants and He also promises to bring him back to the land of his fathers, but he never tells him if he would preserve his life from Esau upon returning. For all Jacob knew, since he had already fathered many sons, perhaps the promises of God were already fulfilled in his children and he was meant to die. Because of this, Jacob separates from his family so that he could face his fate alone. It is this decision that allowed him to properly wrestle with God and to willingly face his death. And it is because he did this, that he was found worthy of a new name, that he experienced the firstfruits of the resurrection.



The above painting was from the Renaissance painter Peter Paul Rubens. Throughout the Renaissance period, Christians portrayed the death of Christ in numerous works of art. The Christians of the time understood this was not only the center of their faith, but it was the center of all reality. If a person could not find the courage to willingly confront evil and death, they would not have the courage necessary to be of any use to anyone. And so, they stared at images of our crucified Lord not only as a commemoration of what He had done, but as the perfect example of what they were called to do.

In our modern culture we have so much death anxiety that we don't want to think about death or any of our other worries. We try desperately to shield ourselves from meditating on the worst, and yet what has all this done for us? Have we become more peaceful in our consciousness? No. We have become the most anxiety ridden culture ever. We are consumed by our fears of death and have become an utterly decadent

culture who doesn't know how to take the right risks. This is one way to understand what Jesus means when He says:

“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”

-Luke 9:24

We cling so desperately to our lives, that we are losing them. Whereas if we found the strength to offer up our lives to God we would find them. And this is the great tragedy. Some will think this subject is too morbid to think upon. They believe that by shutting their eyes towards tragedy they can make it go away. But all they have done is guarantee that they will be unprepared to face it when it comes to their doorstep.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”

-1 Peter 4:12-13

Suffering and death are not things that we can avoid on this side of heaven. The promise of our Lord is not that He will take away this suffering, but that He will transform our suffering into our glory. That if we face it well, we will first of all find the courage necessary to face our fears and overcome them, and second we will find the power of the resurrection that changes all suffering to glory.

“But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. “But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

-Daniel 3:15-18

In our modern day we think that we are so anxious because we face such extreme problems, but this is not the case. Every previous generation has faced conflict and death on a scale that we can hardly fathom, and yet they fared better than we do today. Why? Because of this principle of courage. The friends of Daniel faced death and yet they were not consumed with anxiety and worry, but with boldness they stood for what

was right. And they did this with no certainty that God would preserve their lives. Notice they say

“If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. “But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”

-Daniel 3:17-18

This kind of courage perplexed the King of Babylon and made him stand in awe of these men. It echoes an early Christian martyr named Polycarp. And in the account of his trial it says this:

“The proconsul then said to him, I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast you, unless you repent.

But he answered, Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous.

But again the proconsul said to him, I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent.

But Polycarp said, You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will. While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his herald to proclaim in the midst of the stadium thrice, Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.”

-The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Notice that as they threaten him, he is increasingly filled with confidence and joy. His interrogators are astonished at his courage and all they are able to convey about him is that he was a Christian. But this kind of courage is not developed in a moment of conflict, it is only gained by a lifetime of confronting fears and learning to die daily.

But as astonishing as this principle is for the here and now, it is nothing compared to what it does for eternity. For just as God turns the sufferings of Christ into the salvation of many, so the Christian who dies for God does so in hope that God will do the same for us. This is why the apostle Paul is able to face his own end by saying this:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

-2 Timothy 4:6-8