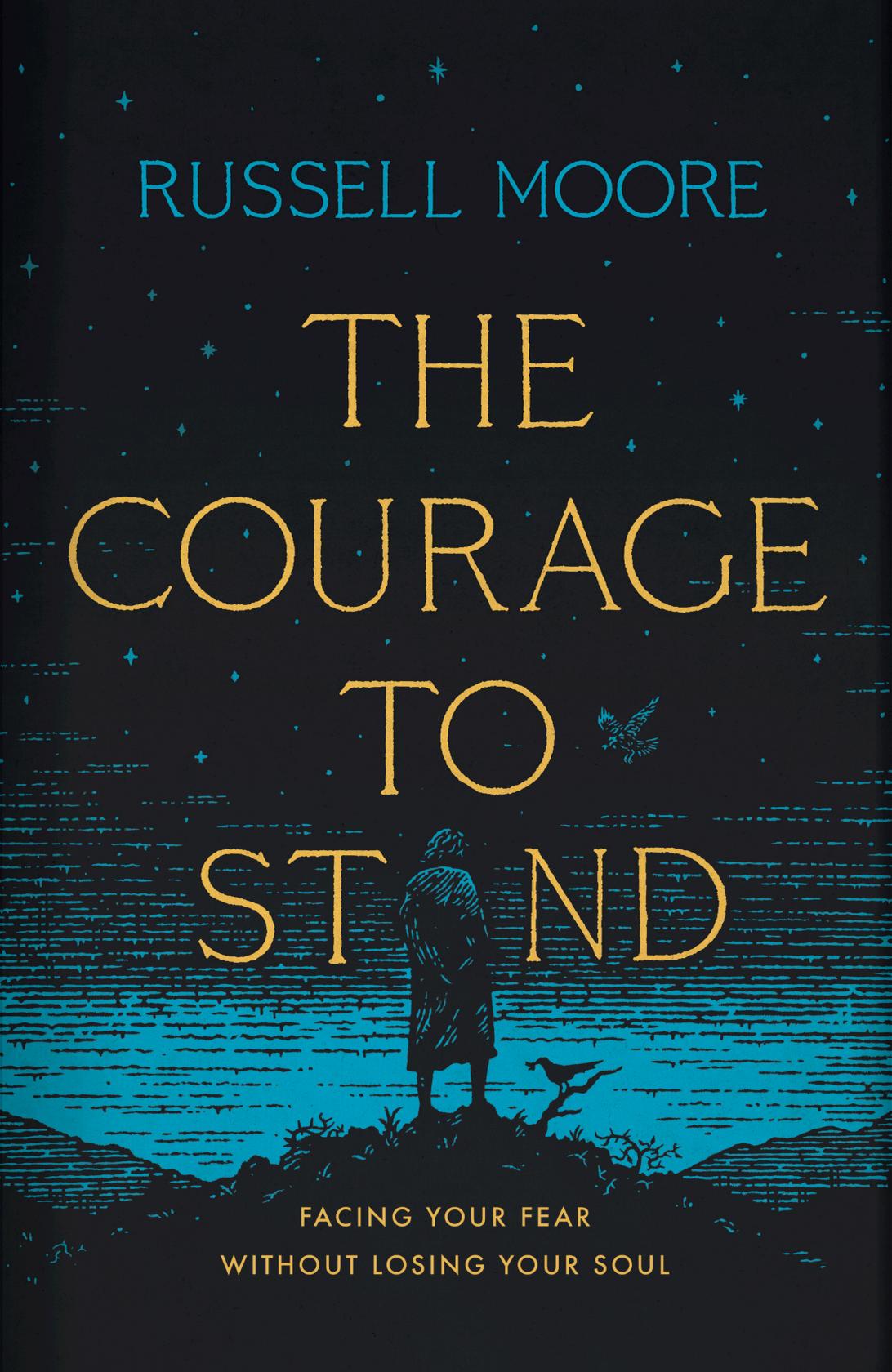


RUSSELL MOORE

THE
COURAGE
TO
STAND



FACING YOUR FEAR
WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SOUL

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*To my parents,
Gary and Renee Moore,*

Thank you.

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Introduction

Whenever I lose my way in life, there are two maps on the wall that can help me navigate my way back home. That happens more often than I would like to admit, but whenever it does, the maps are always there. One of those maps is of the state of Mississippi, with a dot hovering over the coastline there where I grew up. The other map is of a land called Narnia. Those maps help remind me who I am, but, more importantly they remind me what I'm not, what I almost was.

And what I almost was is a teenage suicide.

That last sentence there I have written, and unwritten, at least a dozen times. I'm scared to disclose it, because I've never discussed it before, even with close friends. But that's what this book is about: finding a way in the midst of fear, to somehow, having done all else, to stand.

Those maps are just scraps of paper, but, to me, they are almost portals to alternative realities, and in one of those

realities I am dead. In the other reality, I found my way here, through a wardrobe in a spare room somewhere in England.

Many people, I know, spend a lifetime traumatized and scarred by their childhood religious community. I've heard the stories so often that it startles me how similar the narratives can be, no matter how different the religious backgrounds. Most of the skeptical unbelievers I meet on college campuses or elsewhere are civil and sincere, but when I encounter someone who is hostile or ridiculing of me because of my faith, I've learned to see that, in almost every case, there's a great deal of pain underneath, pain that comes often from some cruel or disappointing religion. That, though, is not my story. As a matter of fact, my home church growing up was a respite for me, the safest place I could, or can, imagine. Our pastors were, for the most part, authentic and humble leaders, and, even now, I aspire on my best days to be like them. The men and women in that church were like that too. Flawed and fallen, as we all are, they modeled for this child a world in which the gospel really did seem to be good news. And when they sang, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God," I could tell they really meant it. And so did I. I don't wish to idealize that little congregation, but it's hard not to do so when, the older I get, the more I am convinced that God really was at work in that place. I well up with gratitude whenever I smell anything that evokes one of those musty Sunday school rooms, or whenever I taste cinnamon gum, which one of

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the elderly ladies would hand me right before church. When I recite the creedal phrase “I believe in the communion of saints,” what first comes to mind is not an assembly of ancient church fathers or reformers or famous missionaries, but these people—truck drivers and cafeteria workers and electricians, who showed me what it meant that Jesus loved me.

Moreover, our liturgical calendar was low-church, and rooted in Nashville rather than Rome or Canterbury, but the rhythms of that calendar ordered my life just as surely as for a medieval monk, with fall and spring revivals, summer youth camps, weekly Sunday schools and evangelism training and choir practices. And, of course, there was the Bible. Sometimes I feel that modern English is my second language, with King James my native tongue. I lived and breathed and found my being in that book, and I have the award ribbons to prove it. Hard to imagine anything like this now, but in that world “Sword Drills” were common, sort of like a spelling-bee except in which children compete to find Bible verses the fastest (“sword” because the Word of God is the “sword of the Spirit” and is “sharper than any two-edged sword”). More often than not, I won those duels, not because I was smarter or holier than my peers, but because I was transfixed with the stories of that book. That was true even in those parts of the Bible I found incomprehensible, such as, up until puberty, the Song of Solomon, and, up until now, the Revelation of John.

My church was not a place of trauma, but, nonetheless, trauma found me. Around the age of fifteen I found myself in a dark wood, a spiritual crisis that spun out into a nearly paralyzing depression. While my church didn't prompt this crisis, I couldn't turn to the church at that moment because I started to wonder if Jesus was the problem, not the solution. What prompted the crisis was the Christian world outside of my church, the American Christianity of the Bible Belt, which was easy to see because that sort of cultural religiosity was the ecosystem in which we lived. Much of it seemed increasingly to me to be buffoonish and even predatory. But, beyond all that, I started to fear that maybe Christianity was a means to an end. Again, I didn't question the authenticity of my church mothers and fathers, but I started to fear that maybe they were the exception rather than the rule to what it meant to be Christian. Though I never doubted their sincerity, I started to wonder if maybe they, along with me, were being duped.

Some of that had to do with the explosion at the time of prophecy conferences and end-times expos, in nearly every town and almost everywhere across the airwaves. People who would rarely even go to church, any church, would drive miles to hear an evangelist explain why the founding of the secular state of Israel meant that, almost guaranteed, the world would end by 1988. That was when I turned sixteen. That was supposed to be exciting to me, I knew, but I was an awkward adolescent virgin,

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wondering why, if I had to live firsthand through one of those incomprehensible books, it couldn't be the Song of Solomon instead of the Revelation of John.

The year 1988 came and went, of course, with my prophecy charts and my virginity both still firmly within my possession. But no one apologized or even explained why those predictions didn't happen. Likewise, the Soviet Union was supposed to be the Gog and Magog of Bible prophecy, setting off the cataclysmic Battle of Armageddon, we were told. Eventually, though, the flag would come down from the Kremlin, with no one to tell us why the world was never forced to kneel before Gog. The problem, for me, was not just the obvious failures of accuracy here, contrasted to the authority with which such predictions were made; it was that the biblical proofs of all this stuff seemed secondary to what sort of interest they would draw. The Bible verses used to support all of these provocative claims were peppered about so quickly, with no context, that one would have to be a Sword Drill champion even to find them all, much less to fact-check the claims. But a Sword Drill champion is what I was. And it started to seem that the point of all of this was something other than a careful reading of what the Bible said.

So what could the point be? Maybe it was politics or culture. Politicians showed up in churches around the region, though not in ours, and I could see that these "testimonies" almost always happened right around election time, and the

politicians were all up for re-election, and held similar partisan affiliations as the preachers who invited them. If Jesus could call both tax collectors *and* zealots in the first century, I wondered why all of his followers, or at least those who were able to share their stories from the pulpit, were of just one stripe now. Tax collectors, of course, were not the equivalent of Internal Revenue Service employees in our own time, but were instead collaborators with the Roman Empire, often defrauding and intimidating their own people in so doing. The zealots were those who wanted, by any means necessary, to uproot the Roman occupying forces. No two groups could have had a wider social and cultural divide, and that was a model I did not see in the culture around me. Though this sort of partisan Christianity was mercifully rare in my own church, everywhere around me, it seemed almost schizophrenic on the relationship of the church to the state.

When it had to do with issues popular with the “base” of churchgoers in the area—even issues as tangential as tax-cuts or spending levels for weapons systems—there was a clearly “Christian” position, and we should, of course, stand up for Jesus on those things, because he is Lord of all, or not lord at all. But when it came to, say, the way we treat black people—which one might think was an important question for post-Jim Crow Mississippi—suddenly an impenetrable separation of church and state was erected that would make even Thomas

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Jefferson blush. In those cases, suddenly, we were to see that this was a “sin problem, not a skin problem” and that just getting people saved would cause this to correct itself. I wasn’t exactly sure how, since personal salvation didn’t automatically produce sexual morality, without discipleship. But apparently this could. Family values had to be talked about, and so did all sorts of other issues.

But not race.

And not issues less popular with those doing the preaching or with those making decisions about whether the pastor would still be paid for preaching. Those issues were “distractions,” despite all the Bible said about love of neighbor and just treatment of the vulnerable. For much of the Bible Belt of that time, there would be no such distractions, and thus plenty of time to discuss whether supermarket scanners were a test run for the Mark of the Beast.

The pastors that led our church, with very rare exceptions, were those who were, no matter whether people liked them or not, “above reproach” morally and ethically. But I could see all sorts of sordid behavior in the Christianized culture around us. Whenever a person on the “other side” of the culture was caught in a sexual scandal, Christians would say that that’s where secularism leads. But when a preacher was discovered to be fondling a child, he was suddenly and quietly “called by God” to another church. That twinkling-of-an-eye Rapture

didn't happen to us, but it did to lots of preachers, who were moved on along to prey on a new unsuspecting pasture. I saw elsewhere in the Christian world, among Christians who thought that our church didn't "preach hard enough against sin," an adult washing a child's mouth out with soap because the child said "Gosh darn it!" (a euphemism, it was explained, for taking the Lord's name in vain). But no one washed out the mouths of those Christian leaders, including pastors who used racist epithets and trafficked in racist jokes.

No one seemed to notice when the Christian man, who talked about little other than "traditional family values," would beat his four-year-old daughter with a belt strap when he saw her skipping along with her friends and concluded she was "dancing." Now, thirty-some years later, I can still see the infernal rage in his eyes, as he catechized his daughter against dancing with each word in rhythm with the pelting of that strap against her skin. And, were you to put me in an extemporaneous Sword Drill, I could find for you in seconds the proverb such men would use to justify their tantrums, should anyone ever have bothered to question them. My church was a refuge of life, but, beyond its walls, the Bible Belt often seemed more belt than Bible.

For me, these questions were not just about seeking out the truth. They were an existential threat. If Christianity were just a means to an end, if Jesus were just a hood ornament on

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top of southern honor culture, then that means that what held everything in the cosmos together was not the Sermon on the Mount but the survival of the fittest. All that would be left is a universe red in tooth and claw, a universe that at its heart is not about love but about power. If that were so, then, however well-intentioned the people were who taught me to sing it, Jesus didn't love me, no matter how the Bible told us so. I wanted to die—and I realize only now that my life as a writer started not with my writing short stories or essays but suicide notes, trying to explain why I didn't want to hurt anyone but that I couldn't bear to live.

Chapter One

Courage and Crisis

What Are You Doing Here?

Along with the Mississippi map, another hangs on my wall. And because it hangs here, I did not hang there.

The reason for all this was because I happened to look, at just the right moment, at a shelf in a bookstore where I saw the name “C. S. Lewis,” and wondered why it was familiar to me. Quickly I recalled the name as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, all of which I had read as a child, multiple times over. To me, these were more than just books of my childhood. “The weird thing about the Narnia books for me was that mostly they seemed true,” wrote novelist Neil Gaiman. “These were reports from a real place.”¹ That was certainly true for me. Until I was

older than I would like to admit, I would feel to the back of wardrobes to make sure there wasn't a snowy landscape back there, complete with a faun and a lamppost. Narnia seemed like a real place, even when the world around me seemed false, when I was, though still a Christian, like the kind of Christian who, in the words of Walker Percy, "lost faith in everything but the Fall of Man."² My adolescent depression meant that, for several months, I was pinned to my own kind of Stone Table, but, too small to attract my notice, there were mice nibbling at the ropes that held me there. And Aslan was on the move.

The book I saw on the shelf was *Mere Christianity*. Out of familiarity with Lewis, I gave it a chance, and I was surprised by (what I came eventually to see was) joy. The reason I loved the Narnia books was because Lewis didn't write to me as to a child, but as a fellow pilgrim. This book was the same. I didn't need his apologetic arguments for the existence of God, and the deity of Christ, and so on. I already believed all of that. What reached me was the fact that, in some way I can't quite describe, I could tell that he was not trying to sell me something. He was bearing witness to something true, to Someone who was Truth.

In that sense, just when I needed him, Lewis was a kind of prophet. He was not a prophet, of course, in the sense of some direct revelation from God, and he would be the last to claim such, which is one of the reasons I listened to him. He was a prophet in the sense that, when I suspected I was being lied to,

he told me the truth. And, in that, he was almost in the spirit of the prophet Elijah. By that, I mean he seemed to come out of nowhere, with a kind of Radio Free Bible Belt from beyond the grave.

Like Elijah in his garment of hair, Lewis would even have looked bizarre in my culture, with that Oxford cloak, pipe hanging from his mouth, and a sardonic look as if to say that he might well play cards and dance, all the while daring some Baptist to take a belt to him. More than that, though, he made sense. Like Elijah and the prophets in his line, all the way down to John the Baptist, Lewis seemed to converge along with them at that scene of the Jordan River painted at the back of the baptistery in my home church. And with that community of prophets, he pointed away from himself to say, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

Not all at once, but gradually, the snow of that winter in my psyche started to melt, and my Screwtape terror brightened into a Narnian reality. Lewis showed me the big vista of the church through the ages, with all of its fumbling and sinning and loving and serving, and sent me right back to what I had learned from my home church. There were frauds and hucksters out there, indeed, but Jesus was alive, and my church pointed in the right direction. Lewis took me there and back again, the long way around.

My adolescent spiritual crisis is hardly that important to the world. Most faiths that persist are tested and tried along

the way. But, over the years, I've come to see that many have lived through the same sort of crisis, and not all of them ended up where I did. A few years later, I was startled with familiarity as I read about a similar teenage crisis experienced by the author James Baldwin. What I noticed was that Baldwin, like me, didn't come to that crisis by way of the intellect, as though doubting the credulity of the supernatural. That came later. For him, as for me, what he felt was fear. He started to see some people, including part of himself, for whom the gospel was just a "gimmick," a way to survive the toughness of the world, and he started to wonder if that's all there is to it. He had supposed, he wrote, "that God and safety were synonymous," and so: "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without."³ Baldwin was, by the time he wrote those words, an atheist. If he had attacked Christianity with anti-supernatural ridicule, I could have rebutted him. If he had presented himself as morally superior to the church, I could have seen through that. But he didn't seem smug or proud or even cynical. He seemed crushed, just like I had been. "I was even lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before," he wrote. "And the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever."⁴

What I had experienced, however, was not a crisis of faith, but a crisis of courage. I was afraid. I was afraid that the horrors I saw among the born-again meant that there was no new birth,

that there was no hope, no point, no meaning, and, beyond all of it, no home at the end of it all. I would be a cosmic orphan, thrown into a chaotic universe with no eye on the sparrow, and no eye on me. And the ultimate outcome of all that would be doom. When I started to lose my religion, I panicked because I realized that would mean losing Jesus, losing myself, losing my future, and losing that church, those people who never even knew I was in trouble, but loved me through it anyway. So, after nearly falling into an abyss, I stood back up, and I am still standing.

My crisis came to a head when, walking near my house under the stars, I turned over my fears, my doubts, my future, to Jesus. Something changed that night, but I wish I could tell you that what that night meant was the end of my crisis, the full transition to courage from cowardice. I want to recall that night as if it were the account of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov who also fell to the ground under a starry sky, who also watered the earth with his tears. "But with each moment he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul," Dostoevsky wrote. "Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind—now and for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life."⁵ But that's not my story.

I stood up, yes, but I can hardly say that I have been a steadfast fighter for the rest of my life. As a matter of fact, I am most often still that weak youth of thirty years ago. That crisis so long ago prepared me for every crisis since. I'm not surprised now when I see Jesus used as a mascot to prop up some identity politics or power agenda, or even to cover up private immorality or public injustice. I'm angrier than ever when I see that, because I know what is happening to the overlooking fifteen-year-olds like me. But I know Jesus well enough now to see that such is not about him at all. That doesn't mean, though, that I am any less scared. And I often find myself, just as then, frustrated that I cannot live up to the Bible stories embedded in my conscience. What I want to be is the kind of Christian who is willing to stand for Jesus, to be willing to stand alone if necessary. But, more than that, I want to be the kind of Christian who can stand that way without the fear of being out of step with whatever group of people I am looking to for approval.

That spiritual crisis ended, and my faith was steeled, more resilient than it had been before. But that same problem—the pull toward fear, especially what the Bible calls “fear of man”—lingers in me, and I would wager in some way or the other in you. I often need an Elijah to appear—out of nowhere—to point me in the right direction. So, like a Passover meal in my psyche, I keep an empty chair there for Elijah.

And yet, I've noticed that when I am the most scared, Elijah is the last person I want to see. During a dark moment in my life, I noticed that, without any conscious decision on my part, I altered my daily Bible reading of the Old Testament, just ever so slightly. At the time I had been reading through 1 and 2 Samuel, and then on into 1 Kings through the life of Solomon, and then suddenly veered on over to the Psalms. I noticed that, and questioned why. As I thought about it I became convinced that subconsciously I was avoiding that middle section of 1 and 2 Kings because I knew who was there: a prophet called Elijah. I wanted to avoid him the same way a laid-off person wants to avoid her "Employee-of-the-Month" neighbor, or the way an obese person wants to avoid his marathon-running brother-in-law. And the reason is the comparison only highlights one's inadequacies, whether real or perceived. Once again, I was crushed and fearful and cowardly, not the fiery Elijah I had wanted to be.

At first glance, that makes sense. When we think of Elijah, we think of steely determination, the willingness to defy gods and kings, in scorn of the consequences. If you asked me as a child in Sunday school to draw a picture of Elijah, I would have drawn the scene that I thought summed up the prophet's life, when he stood on Mount Carmel, and called down fire from heaven. If you're not familiar with the account, it is really about a kind of contest between the prophet and the priests of the Canaanite deity Baal. After pronouncing judgment on the

erring king of Israel, Ahab, for his efforts to merge the worship of Israel's God with these fertility idols, Elijah subpoenaed all of the other side's religion-mongers to pray to their respective gods, to see who would answer with fire.

In that moment, Elijah is everything I want to be. He verbally spars with his opponents—sarcastically mocking their impotent god. He confidently pours water on his own sacrifice, cries out to the skies, and then, with a bolt of incandescence, the fire falls. That is strong; that is “prophetic.” That's what it means to stand, I tend to think to myself. So, in those moments, I just want to do an end-run around that hair-suited seer.

But that's harder to do than it may appear. Try to avoid Elijah in moving through the Bible and one will find, much as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel did, that he has the annoying habit of showing up persistently, often when he is least expected. That's somewhat surprising because, at least in terms of space devoted to him, Elijah is not a major figure in the biblical account. As a matter of fact, he is a kind of mayfly in the sunset of the Scriptures; one moment we see him and the next he is gone, in a literal blaze of glory. But Elijah's absence is felt all over the rest of the Bible, even as his mantle and his spirit move on through the line of prophets. Indeed, the very last words of the Old Testament canon are about Elijah, and they are about the future, not the past. God said through the prophet Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and

awesome day of the LORD comes” (Mal. 4:5). And then there’s silence, for four hundred years.

When the biblical story resumes in the New Testament, Elijah is everywhere present, in hints and allusions and images. John the Baptist carried out the motif of the wild man of the woods with a word of impending judgment. And Jesus identified this baptizer—his own cousin—with the prophecies of the return of Elijah. At the same time, in his inaugural explanation of what his ministry would be, Jesus pointed to the ministry of Elijah and his successor Elisha as demonstrating that the good news of God’s kingdom was always meant to overwhelm national and ethnic boundaries (Luke 4:25–27). And, in the Gospels, many of the aspects of Jesus’ calling evoke scenes from the life of Elijah—from the raising of a widow’s son from death to miraculous provision of food to a visible ascent into heaven.

Moreover, many scholars have noticed a similar Elijah theme in the life of the apostle Paul, especially in his recounting of his story in the opening chapters of the letter to the Galatians. Saul of Tarsus, after all, thought himself to be operating out of “zeal”—the very word used of Elijah in his mission to uproot Baalism—when he sought to wipe out the Christian gatherings in Damascus. His zeal, like that of Elijah, though in a distinct way, led to a crisis when on the road to Syria, he was confronted by the resurrected Messiah. And then Paul followed the same path Elijah did, when he thought his life’s mission

in jeopardy—he headed out into the wilderness, through the Arabian desert toward the place where God had met with his people at Sinai. And there, like Elijah, he experienced the presence of God in such a way that Paul was freed from the need for the approval of others, whether of credentialed apostles in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–10) or of the crowds of his constituency (Gal. 2:11–12). After this crisis, Paul could write, “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10).

On this theme, New Testament scholar N. T. Wright notes the connections, especially in Galatians, of the apostle Paul with the prophet Elijah. “The parallel with Elijah—the verbal echoes are so close and the reflection on ‘zeal’ so exact, that Paul must have intended them—indicates that, like Elijah, Paul made a pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai in order to go back to the place where the covenant was ratified,” argues Wright. “He wanted to go and present himself before the One God, to explain that he has been ‘exceedingly zealous,’ but that his vision, his entire worldview, had been turned on its head. And he received his instructions: ‘Go back and announce the new king.’”⁶ One need not agree with all of Wright’s conclusions to see that the tracking between Paul and Elijah seems too close to be merely coincidence.

And this connection is deeply meaningful. The words of Paul's testimony are radical to the core, revealing to us both Christ and crisis. "I have been crucified with Christ" the apostle declares (Gal. 2:20), words intended to liberate us—from fear, from our need to belong and to conform, and from our need to find safety in the movement of the crowd. But that safety and freedom and rest come about not through willing and wanting, but through crisis, and that crisis comes through the way of Elijah.

The Elijah narrative is indeed about courage, but not in the way that I always assumed. That's because I, like many of us, often misunderstand both the definition of courage and the meaning of Elijah. Much of what I admired about Elijah is not actually the point of the story. I aspire to the sort of fearlessness that could respond right back to Ahab that the king, not the prophet, was "the troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17–18). The same sort of sass and swagger seems present when Elijah threatened drought, holding back rain by his word, and when he challenged the prophets of Baal to their contest on Mount Carmel. He didn't just defeat them; he humiliated them. They screamed and cut themselves, to try to get the attention of Baal, but "there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention" (1 Kings 18:29). Elijah did no such theatrics. He simply called for fire, and the fire fell. He was there vindicated, uncontestably, as the

one who bears real prophetic power. And then he tore down their altars, and killed them all on the spot.

That seems “prophetic” to me, bold and unflinching and visibly winning. And apparently I’m not alone, since two of the disciples of Jesus expected the same thing, right after they had seen, with Jesus on a mountain, a vision of Elijah. As they moved through Samaria, the ancestral region of the despised King Ahab so many years before, James and John were offended that the village there did not receive their message, and so they asked, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?” (Luke 9:54). I must admit that makes sense to me. But Jesus rebuked them, and kept on walking (Luke 9:55–56). Not only would he not destroy the Samaritans with fire, though, but along the way, he would tell the now well-known story portraying a Samaritan as the obedient protagonist (Luke 10:25–37). Why did Jesus reenact so much of the Elijah story, but not this? It’s because he had, Luke recounts, “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). And what was waiting in Jerusalem? Elijah knew, because, while transfigured in light on the mountain, the old prophet spoke to Jesus “of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). What was waiting in Jerusalem was the cross.

When it comes to courage, Mount Carmel is not the hinge point of the Elijah story, but a prelude to something else. Right

after this moment of triumph, Jezebel—the murderous wife of Ahab—vowed to see Elijah dead by the next day. Of Elijah, the Bible states: “Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). The story only goes downward from there as Elijah treks out into the wilderness to flee from this threat. Far from the flannel-graph Spartacus I have expected since Sunday school, the picture of Elijah in the wilderness is almost pathetic. He is afraid. He is weak to the point of collapse. He is lonely. He is exhausted. He is questioning his own calling and mission. He seems depressed to the point of, at best, whining and, at worst, self-harm. And, even at the resolution of the crisis, God speaks to him not of his own bright future, but of what God will do through others, rendering Elijah seemingly irrelevant.

Most often when I have heard this account taught or preached, the focus has been on Elijah facing some form of “burnout.” The application is that human beings must protect ourselves from the sort of over-extension that can lead to this form of exhaustion. Often, along with this are the practical recommendations found in God’s provision for Elijah—proper nutrition, adequate sleep, and time for prayer and reflection. This is immediately relevant, of course, because many people find themselves in just that place—maybe someone who is exhausted by care of small children or of an elderly parent or of a disabled spouse or someone who bound up all of his or her

identity in a career only to come to midlife to find only numbness and disillusion. But what Elijah was facing in the wilderness was more than just “burnout,” it seems to me, but rather something more comprehensive—a “breakdown.” In the wilderness, God was doing for Elijah what Elijah had done on the mountain—removing the Baals, this time from the prophet’s own heart.

That’s why he’s the model we need.

The way of courage, as defined by the gospel, is not the pagan virtue of steeliness and fearlessness, much less our ambient culture’s picture of winning and displaying, or strength and swagger. Getting the climax point of the Elijah story right is important because, if we don’t, we will follow him somewhere other than where he ultimately was led: to the crucified glory of Jesus Christ. Without this piece of the story, we will conclude that Elijah was the picture of courage we think we need and that we pretend to have. It’s a picture of courage that is celebrated in everything from ancient Greek legends to modern action films to the cavalier confidence we feign in ourselves. But if one is missing a crucial piece of the story, one gets the story wrong, even if the facts that one have are completely right.

Consider if you put the emphasis of, say, Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son on the son’s asking for his father’s inheritance, leaving his house, spending his living on partying and prostitutes, and then, after famine comes, ending up in the pig pen

eating garbage. All that's true, but that's not what the story is about. Left with that, one would see the parable as just another wisdom teaching about what happens to ungrateful children or about the necessity of self-control. Only when we see the father running to his returning son, embracing him, and calling for celebration can we make sense of the rest of it. The same is true of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. If all we read is the story of the man who is beaten by thieves and left on the side of the road, we might conclude that the point of the story is a cautionary tale of "watch out, or this could happen to you." But then we would not only miss the meaning of the story, we would come to precisely the same conclusion as that of the priest and Levite in the tale who avoided the beaten man, passing on to the other side of the path. Only in light of the Samaritan's mercy on this traumatized person do we see the picture of mercy Jesus was commending.

And the same is true here. We do not see in Elijah a picture of courage-through-triumph but of courage-through-crucifixion. Elijah is not, then, a "role-model" or example for us of courage. His life was a dramatic enactment, ahead of time, of the cross, just as your life is a dramatic enactment, after the fact, of that same cross.

Consider the way that Jesus identifies the "spirit of Elijah" in the life of his cousin, John the baptizer. Like Elijah, John's ministry is not all boldness and bluster. Yes, John, like Elijah,

calls a rebellious people away from their idols to a living God. Yes, John, like Elijah, delivers a word of rebuke to a wicked ruler. Yes, John, like Elijah, delivers an unpopular revelation from God, in John's case that an impoverished laborer from the backwaters of Galilee is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." But John is no untouchable hero. Even after baptizing Jesus, and hearing the voice of God from the skies overhead pronouncing the Nazarene his beloved Son, John feared that he was wrong. From his jail cell, he sent messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). A narcissistic cult leader or political guru would be offended by this wobbliness, but Jesus was not. He commended John as the greatest of all the prophets up until that time. For Jesus, John's continuity with Elijah was not, as assumed, in his power and confidence, but in this weakness and fear. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force," Jesus said. "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:12-14).

Later, after Elijah appeared on a mountain with Jesus before his disciples, Jesus said that his followers misunderstood what they should expect from Elijah. They were perplexed that, after manifesting briefly, Elijah would go away, leaving Jesus alone, and on his way to crucifixion. They asked why the teachers of

the Scripture said that Elijah must return first, before the restoring of all things. Jesus did not point them to Elijah's winning argumentation, nor to his miraculous scenes, but to his humiliation and suffering. "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" Jesus taught. "But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him" (Mark 9:12–13).

Indeed, the Scripture presents John from start to finish as starkly vulnerable. We see him first, not thundering on the side of the riverbank, but as an embryo, leaping in the womb of his mother in the presence of his likewise in utero Lord. Even when we do find the fiery prophet we expect, he is essentially exiled from his home and community, eating an unpalatable diet and preaching an even more unpalatable message. And then, of course, we see him ultimately as a head on a silver platter. None of this is a deviation from the way of Elijah. It is the way of Elijah. That's why when Jesus identified himself with Elijah, he was right away exiled from his community and in danger of an angry hometown crowd throwing him from the precipice of the mountain overlooking his village (Luke 4:28–30).

All of that is because the "fire from heaven" Elijah is explained by the "lost in the wilderness" Elijah, not the other way around, just as the glory we have in Jesus is explained by the crucified Christ, and not the other way around. The cross

is not a momentary deviation from glory, but where we find a glory that is different from that of the world, different from what we would create for ourselves. And the courage of Elijah is seen not, first of all, when he is “owning” Ahab with figurative and literal firepower, but when, it seems, Ahab is “owning” him.

At the moment of crisis and collapse, that’s when he encountered God. And that’s where he, and we, can find the courage to stand. But even that language of “standing” can deceive us. We talk about “standing” for what we believe, and what we mean is usually a pose of confidence, like leadership coaches who tell their clients to project strength through body language—in some cases, to literally place their hands on their hips like a superhero. But a biblical stance of glory is not that, but hands pinned down, outside of our power, as we are crucified. What it means to “stand” for Christ is not, it turns out, to evacuate our internal lives of all fear, or to humiliate our enemies with incontrovertible “winning,” but instead to live out in our very lives the drama of the cross. That means that courage does not come from matching the world’s power and wisdom with more of our own, but instead by being led, like Elijah, where we do not want to go (John 21:18). The courage to stand is the courage to be crucified.

That sort of courage is formed in crisis, and those crises—turning points in our lives—are sometimes hidden to us. They are usually not big moments but little, ordinary decision points

that shape, over time, who we are, what we love, what we fear, and how we stand. These are the moments where things could go one way or the other, and they usually aren't dramatic and cinematic, but are more like the "butterfly effect" in time-travel stories, in which seemingly tiny movements change the future in ways you can't perceive. Courage isn't just about the cancer patient bravely facing chemotherapy, but also the healthy person who is trying to put out of her mind the lump she felt in the shower. Courage isn't just the divorced person trying to put his life back together, but the happily married couple who look at their children and wonder how they'll ever afford to send them to college. Courage isn't just the dissident refusing to deny Christ when tortured by a dictator, but the Christian in a free country who refuses to define his faith by loyalty to a politician of any sort.

That means the chief need in every era is not what we first think of when we think of courage—physical bravery, but instead what may be called "moral courage." Mark Twain once wrote, "It is curious—curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare."⁷ That line is often quoted, but less often is the quote placed in context. Twain was reflecting on the ancient Roman Empire's strategy of buying the complacency of the people through trading their liberties for allowances of corn and oil. Twain saw the same factors at work in the government's pension policies for

veterans at the time. One need not agree with Twain's analogy in this case (I don't think I do) to see the larger point. He firmly believed this, and yet Twain conceded that, for all his opinionating about the lack of moral courage, he had failed at this point too.

Twain was invited to make his case about those pensions he found so odious, not before an audience of his fellow writers or journalists but before a veterans' convention, where his viewpoint would be, to say the least, unpopular. He wouldn't do it. "I might try to say the words but would lack the guts and would fail," he said. "It would be one tottering moral coward trying to rebuke a houseful of like breed—men nearly as timid as himself but not any more so."⁸ Many would agree with him privately, Twain wrote, but they would not say so publicly, for fear of "saying the disagreeable thing" and being out of step with their peers. That was, he said, the sort of fear that is part of the nature of humanity, and he didn't see it changing. This was only a little over a century ago, and it's obvious he was right, if not about the policy issue then about human nature. That aspect hasn't changed yet.

Indeed, it's been a couple of millennia, since Jesus, a more reliable authority than old Samuel Clemens, told us why moral cowardice is so universal among human beings. Jesus did many signs before the crowds, the apostle John wrote, and yet most of the people did not believe. Quoting the prophetic writings,

John said, “Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him,” and yet: “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:41–43).

This is hardly unique to these first-century Jewish people. Everyone, no matter whom or where or when, has similar “Pharisees”—gatekeepers of who is “in” and who is “out.” Everyone fears being cast out of some sort of “synagogue.” For some, it’s a political tribe or a religious group or a generational cohort or just a sense of being “normal” in the world, whatever we consider to be our “world” and whatever that world considers to be “normal.” We want, if not applause, then at least not rejection and insecurity. We want to find safety in the herd, and we just choose different herds. The problem is that much of what is actually defined as courage in Scripture—the bridling of the passions, kindness, humility—is seen as timidity, while many who feel themselves “courageous” because they “tell it like it is” are really just seeking to be part of their protective tribes, even when those tribes are boisterous and angry. They may feel that they “stand” for something, but this is not courage, if courage is defined by Christ. To follow the way of Christ, is to stand for the things that matter, and those things are not just the right “side” on “issues” or the right “side” on “doctrines” but

conformity with Christ in terms of the affections, the experiential lived reality of walking with Christ.

Courage is needed not to do radically important things, but to live out a quiet, ordinary life, with integrity and with love. That sort of life requires not just clarity about “the issues,” as though our problems were with abstract issues. That sort of life requires courage, the courage to walk out there into the wilderness, not knowing where we are going, the courage to stand, and the courage to fall.

My map of Narnia is a map to nowhere, I know. Narnia is fictional, after all. But is it really? I can’t help but think of how the wardrobe-pioneer Lucy wept when told she must return back home, away from Narnia and from the lion Aslan. “And how can I live, never meeting you?” she asks. Aslan assures her they will meet again prompting her brother Edmund to ask whether Aslan is there too, back in the “regular” world. “I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”⁹ The map of Narnia is, in some ways, fictional, yes. But no more so than the map of Mississippi.

I’ve come to see that I’ve lived in both realities, and that Jesus was with me in both plotlines. Those experiences didn’t teach me how not to fear, but they did teach me how to stand through fear, how to listen above the crowd for a voice, or

maybe a roar, off there in the distance, on the other side of what's scary. No matter how confident, or anxious, you feel right now, you, like Elijah, have a calling to carry out, a pilgrimage to take. And you can find courage for the crisis, because you can find Christ in the crisis. And soon you will see that, really, every moment is a crisis.

That's not easy, though, when one cannot see what's ahead. Jesus scared his first followers, with all his talk of his impending arrest and execution and, maybe more than all that, with his talk of going away. When he saw their distress, he reminded them that his Father's house has many rooms, that he was leaving to prepare a place for them. "And you know the way to where I am going," he said (John 14:4). His disciple Thomas spoke up. We call him "doubting Thomas," quite unfairly, but what I hear in Thomas's voice is not doubt but fear. He was afraid that Jesus had disclosed a landmark and a time to meet him, or maybe a secret incantation that would open a portal to the other side. Maybe, Thomas probably wondered whether he was asleep when these instructions were given. "Lord we do not know where you are going," Thomas pleaded. "How can we know the way?" (John 14:5). Jesus said, "I am the Way" (John 14:6).

Elijah walked that Way, and so must you. Your courage will not be found in your triumphant Mount Carmel moments, when you scatter your enemies, real and imagined, from in front of you, and when you can see clearly how protected and

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accepted you are. Your courage will be forged instead, like that of Elijah and everyone else who has followed this path, when you cannot stand on your own at all, when you are collapsed in the wild places, maybe even begging for death. Like Elijah, you will hear the words, “What are you doing here?” Elijah thought he was walking to Mount Sinai, but he was really walking toward Mount Calvary. And so are you. Only the crucifiable self can find the courage to stand. Do not be afraid.

There is no map here. But you know the Way.

We live in a fearful and cowardly time. Some are anxious and withdrawn, seeking to escape the notice of whatever scares them. Others mask their fear with fighting and quarrelsomeness. The root of all of this is the fear we might lose our belonging in whatever tribe in which we seek safety, the fear we might have to stand alone.

The crisis we face is not a crisis of clarity but a crisis of courage. Our problem is not so much a lack of knowledge as a lack of nerve. And yet, Jesus told us that we are to stand with courage. That doesn't mean we will be fearless, but that we will know how to face our fear and keep walking toward the voice that calls us homeward. Gospel courage is nothing like the bravado of this anxious age. The call to courage is terrifying because the call to courage is a call to be crucified.

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