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Title: Profiles of Courageous Men

Text: 2 Samuel 23:9-10, Daniel 3, Philemon

Father's Day is one of those days that is generally filled with a variety of emotions. As I see it, there are any number of scenarios: Bad fathers with bad kids. Good fathers with bad kids. Bad fathers with good kids. Good fathers with good kids. Some fathers with both good and bad kids. Kids who don't know WHO their father is. Fathers who don't know WHO their kids are. Kids who don't know WHERE their fathers are. Fathers who don't know WHERE their kids are. Fathers who no longer have kids. Kids who no longer have fathers. Sometimes under the best of circumstances, being a father has its challenges. So for many, Father's Day is an emotional day. A day filled with joy and honor or a day with sorrow and pain – a reminder of loss and maybe even anger. Today marks the 10th Father's Day since my dad passed. Being in ministry, I was not able to spend Father's Day with my dad for some 20 years, but the last 7 years of his life I was blessed to be able to spend time with my dad on Father's Day – three of which were in a nursing facility. Yet I could hand deliver a card, share a tear or a laugh. So preparing for today's message and reflecting on my Father brought both smiles and tears.

Today's message is more directed toward the males of our congregation, but I believe we can all be encouraged from three different portions of Scripture. The Bible is a book of stories and includes many biographies. Most of those biographies are about men. Some are tragic stories of sin and failure – Cain murdered his brother; Eli failed as a father; Judas betrayed Jesus. But many of the stories are profiles of courage. They were men who did what was good and right, even under difficult circumstances. They were the men who made their sons and daughters proud. You may know the more famous men of the Bible – Noah, Abraham, David, Daniel, Peter, John, Paul, and Timothy. But, I invite you to meet some COURAGEOUS men whose names are less familiar but whose courage was incredible.

- 1. Eleazar – standing alone.** Let me introduce you to Eleazar. He was a soldier in the army of King David around 1000 BC. The great enemy of Israel was the neighbor nation of Philistia with constant threats, a strong army and fierce battles. David identified an elite corps of his 30 best soldiers and called them his "Mighty Men." They were competent, godly and fiercely loyal. David could trust them to do whatever needed to be done and to fight heroically no matter how fierce the conflict. It was a very high honor to be one of the Mighty Men. There was a super elite group of THREE named from the Mighty Men. They were the BEST of the best. The three were the most courageous soldiers in the nation. They didn't whine or complain. They weren't afraid of difficulty. They were willing to sacrifice anything, INCLUDING their own lives. The very short biography of one of those three is in 2 Samuel 23:9-10 – "*Eleazar, son of Dodai the Ahohite.*" Eleazar stood ALONE in battle. When the rest of the army retreated, he stayed. When the enemy attacked, he fought them back. When he was so exhausted that his fingers "*froze to the sword*", Eleazar kept on fighting. It takes great courage to stay when others leave, to fight when you are outnumbered, to keep going when you are ready to drop from exhaustion. The courage of Eleazar left a heritage for all of history to follow: God honored his courage. God brought about a military victory that was humanly impossible. God added His victory to Eleazar's courage. That's what God does for good and courageous men. Eleazar's father was honored. One of the repeated themes of the Bible is that fathers are honored or dishonored by their sons. While we don't know much about his Dad, we do know that Eleazar was known by his father's name – "*son of Dodai the Ahohite.*" He made his father proud! Eleazar honored his children. These hard-to-pronounce biblical names don't always mean much to us today, but they meant everything to the people of those generations. For at least a hundred years afterward there must have been children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who proudly told about their relationship to Eleazar. May we have men like Eleazar today! Men who will stand and fight for the cause of God, even if everyone else retreats. Men who hang in there even when they feel like quitting. Men who honor their fathers before them and their children after them.
- 2. Hananiah, Mishael & Azariah – faithful no matter what.** A second profile in courage joins together three names in a famous and familiar story of spectacular faith and courage. It is the story of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Are those names familiar to you? You likely know them by different names. These young men were kidnapped and raised by strangers. Although born Jewish, they were raised by pagan Babylonians in the 6th century BC under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. They were fed a foreign diet, taught a new language, kept from their families, and given new names. Their Babylonian names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I suspect

that most Bible readers remember them better by their pagan names than by their original Hebrew names. Nebuchadnezzar was a very powerful emperor. He was pretty much a “nut case.” Increasingly convinced that he was god, Nebuchadnezzar built a huge statue of himself and ordered everyone in Babylon to bow down and worship it. These young men refused because they knew the first of the Ten Commandments – *“You shall not bow down to an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”* These three courageous young Hebrew men REFUSED to bow down. The king threatened them that if, when they heard the music being played, they didn’t bow down to the statue he had made, he would have them put to death by cremation (being thrown into a fiery furnace). But *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up’”* (Daniel 3:16-18). Amazing courage! They remembered the lessons of God taught to them when they were very young. They held true to the truth of God even after they had gone through extensive pagan indoctrination. Let us never underestimate the lifelong power of what we teach our children at home and in Sunday School – it can be stronger than public education, peer pressure, and MTV combined. Men of courage will remember and do what is right even when trained to do what is wrong. They were ready to die for their faith. Death by cremation is too awful to imagine. Yet, these young men would rather die by torture than compromise their love and loyalty to God. God was absolutely and unquestionably #1 in all three of their lives. They were faithful to God no matter what happened. Did they want to be rescued from cremation? Of course! Did they believe that God was stronger than either the emperor or the executioners? Absolutely! Yet, they were going to do what was right whether God saved them or not! In today’s culture, these three men of courageous faith would say that faithfulness to God is the right thing to do even if you – lose your job, lose your friends, lose your money, lose your girlfriend, OR lose your life. Never compromise God under any threat. God can save you from anything, but even if God doesn’t intervene, still DO WHAT IS RIGHT!

- 3. Onesimus – going back.** Lastly, our third profile of courage is recorded in one of the shortest books of the Bible – so short that we can read the entire book in just a few minutes! The date was around AD 60. The Apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome, awaiting the outcome of an appeal to Caesar. While in Rome, he met a young runaway slave named Onesimus from the city of Colossae. Paul and Onesimus became friends and Onesimus became a Christian. He also became Paul’s personal assistant. Perhaps at first Paul didn’t know that Onesimus was a slave. It is not something that a runaway slave would be quick to tell to a Roman citizen like Paul. Apparently Onesimus had stolen from his owner and then ran away to Rome where he hoped to keep his freedom by getting lost in the mass of urban population. There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. The economy of the empire depended on them. Some slaves were teachers and physicians. Others were farmers and laborers. In every case, the owner had the power of life and death over his slaves. In the best of cases, slaves were treated like members of the family. In the worst of cases, they were beaten, tortured, branded and crucified. Sometimes they were severely treated for the smallest infraction of arbitrary household rules. The Romans knew that there was always a risk of an uprising and that slaves had to be kept under control by every means. Otherwise, a rebellion could be successful because the slaves significantly outnumbered the free Roman citizens. When Paul found out that Onesimus was a slave, he sent him back to his owner in Colossae, and man named Philemon. Paul knew Philemon well. Philemon was an affluent Christian leader of the Colossian church. But, that did not guarantee that Philemon would treat Onesimus well. Two standard approaches with runaways were: 1. Brand their foreheads with the letter “F” for “Fugitive.” 2. Publicly crucify them as an example to other slaves. Paul wrote a letter to Philemon and gave it to Onesimus to take back with him. (Read Philemon – just 25 verses.) Imagine yourself in Onesimus’ situation. You were a slave. You escaped. At long last, you are free! You became a Christian. Now you are being sent back to a master from whom you stole. Anything could happen. All that stands between you and the branding iron or the cross is a single page of rolled up scroll with a letter pleading your case. Would you not be tempted to destroy the letter and never return? Wouldn’t there be a stronger pull toward freedom than to slavery? Wouldn’t you argue that slavery was wrong? Onesimus decided to make things right even if the other guy seeks revenge or justice. He returned to Colossae, gave the letter to Philemon, and trusted God to take care of him. Onesimus was one very courageous man. What would such courage look like today? Perhaps going back to a former employer or teacher, or spouse, or partner, or another Philemon in your life – going back to make things right, even if the other person is wrong and even if the

outcome is anything but certain. And that's the end of the story. The Bible never tells us what happened. We must assume that Onesimus returned. He didn't destroy the letter because we still have it today. But, wait a minute – there is a hint of the outcome of this courageous profile. It is set in the great city of Ephesus. The ruins of Ephesus are one of the archaeological wonders of the world. It was the home of a strong and famous church pastored by the biblical leader Timothy and was the recipient of the New Testament book called Ephesians. Fifty years after Paul wrote to Philemon from his Roman imprisonment, there was a wonderful bishop leading the church of Ephesus – Bishop Onesimus. Not all courageous stories end so well, but many do.

4. **Conclusion.** Father or son, young man or old, may your name be added to the list of God's profiles of courage. As a courageous follower of Jesus Christ, you may be called on – to fight alone while others retreat, to be faithful against awful threats, or maybe to go back and make things right. **Do what is right regardless of the threats or outcome. Be courageous. Make your name a source of delight and pride for your father, for your children, and most of all, for God Himself.**