

COURAGE OR OBEDIENCE?
A Devotional Meditation from
1 Samuel 15:22; Proverbs 14:12, 16:25; Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 12:28-34
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November 28, 2020

No one questions the value of courage, whether on the battlefield, in the sporting arena, or in a cancer ward. Our shared history is full of stories about courage, both small and great, which ordinary men and women demonstrated to come through great trials. Whether they live or die, those with courage not only inspire us, but define by their actions the very meaning of honor.

One such story comes from the Battle of Gettysburg, the turning point in the American Civil War. Here is an official account:

On the morning of July 2, 1863, the First Minnesota [Volunteer Infantry], along with the other units of the II Corps, took its position in the center of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge. Late in the day, the Union III Corps, under heavy attack by the Confederate I Corps, collapsed creating a dangerous gap in the Union line. The advancing Confederate brigades were in position to breakthrough and then envelope the Union forces. At that critical moment, the First Minnesota was ordered to attack. Advancing at double time, the Minnesotans charged into the leading Confederate brigade with unbounded fury. Fighting against overwhelming odds, the heroic Minnesotans gained the time necessary for the Union line to reform. But the cost was great. Of the 262 members of the regiment present for duty that morning, only 47 answered the roll that evening. The regiment incurred the highest casualty rate of any unit in the Civil War.*



The First Minnesota, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1863, Don Troiani, [National Guard Bureau](https://www.nationalguard.mil/Resources/Image-Gallery/Historical-Paintings/Heritage-Series/First-Minnesota/).

In a very real sense, the heroes of the 1st Minnesota saved the day for the Union Army. On that same day, veterans of the 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry stemmed the tide of a Confederate attack at Little Round Top. They, too, faced overwhelming odds, fighting until their ammunition was exhausted. They succeeded only by throwing in their last full measure of strength into a desperate bayonet charge that routed their enemies.

Had either one of these Confederate attacks succeeded, the Union line at Gettysburg would have been broken, and quite possibly the battle would have resulted in a Confederate victory. Similar circumstances had brought a Confederate battlefield triumph

* "The First Minnesota," United States National Guard Bureau, (<https://www.nationalguard.mil/Resources/Image-Gallery/Historical-Paintings/Heritage-Series/First-Minnesota/>).

just two months earlier at Chancellorsville, and would bring another victory to the Southern armies at Chickamauga just two months later. But Gettysburg was different. Not only did the Union line hold, but in so doing it stopped the last major Confederate invasion of the North – an invasion that could well have turned the tide of the entire war.

So we remember with honor the sacrifices of the 1st Minnesota and the 20th Maine. But we should also remember the battlefield failure that caused them to make such sacrifices. Earlier that day, Gen. Dan Sickles, commanding the US III Corps, had moved his divisions forward to higher ground about half a mile in front of his assigned position. It was a tactically sound decision that nearly spelled defeat for the Union army. The III Corps occupied a vulnerable spot in the line. The forward movement opened gaps to their right and left – gaps that Gen. James Longstreet's Southern soldiers quickly exploited. The Minnesota and Maine men were the only ones available to plug those gaps, and so they were thrown into the fray just as Sickles' shattered corps fell back in disarray. Could it have been different if Dan Sickles had obeyed his orders? Probably. Many wives and mothers who grieved lost loved ones would instead have welcomed their men home after the war, and many fatherless children would have grown up in greater peace having their heroes at home rather than only in their memories.

Victory is precious. Victory at great cost even more so. But how much better is victory won with little cost in blood and treasure – victory that enables even more people to enjoy its fruits?

This is where we learn that there is more to victory than courage. Samuel the prophet explained as much to King Saul when he said:

“Does *ADONAI* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of *ADONAI*? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay heed than the fat of rams.
1 Samuel 15:22 TLV

Obedience. That is the essential ingredient. It tempers our foolishness, reigns in our impulsive outbursts, and instills discipline in our wild hearts. Yet obedience itself can also be carried to excess. Blind obedience, just like raw courage, can lead to disaster, as Proverbs tells us:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.
Proverbs 14:12, 16:25

So then, there is a right way to go about obeying with courage. At its heart is faith – a faith built on trust in someone who has proven reliable. Learning who is reliable, or just how reliable they can be, is the stuff of relationship. Blind obedience and inflated courage are the stuff of outward form with no root. We learn this also from Scripture, from the most unlikely teacher: a Roman soldier. Here is his story as recorded by Matthew:

Now when *Yeshua* came into Capernaum, a centurion came begging for help. ⁶“Master,” he said, “my servant is lying at home paralyzed, horribly tormented.” *Yeshua* said to him, “I’ll come and heal him.” But the centurion said, “Master, I’m not worthy to have You come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when *Yeshua* heard this, He marveled and

said to those who were following, "Amen, I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith! Moreover, I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and they will recline at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness; in that place will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then *Yeshua* said to the centurion, "Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you." And the servant was healed in that same hour. (Matthew 8:5-13 TLV)

Ah. Now we see. It's a matter of obeying proper authority. How do we know who that authority is? Like all things, it is simple, but it is also difficult. Proper authority is that which has gained its position through the right processes. It is earned, not grasped or taken. No matter how loud the usurpers may yell, no matter how often they scream their baseless claims, there is a due process for conferring authority on those qualified to wield it. That process is ultimately rooted in the law of Almighty God, the Supreme Authority. Recognizing Him is the start of the process of understanding His authority structures – and how to relate to them. This is exactly what we learn from a famous conversation our Messiah had with a Bible scholar of His day:

One of the *Torah* scholars came and heard them debating. Seeing that *Yeshua* had answered them well, he asked Him, "Which commandment is first of all?" *Yeshua* answered, "The first is, '*Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad*. Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One. And you shall love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." "Well said, Teacher," the *Torah* scholar said to Him. "You have spoken the truth, that He is *echad*, and besides Him there is no other! And 'to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love the neighbor as oneself,' is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When *Yeshua* saw that he had answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared any longer to question Him. (Mark 12:28-34 TLV)

Notice what the scholar said. It is essential "to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, and will all the strength." Blind obedience is not only insufficient, it is counterproductive. So also is raw, untempered courage. We must think through each situation, using our understanding to obey rightly. Knowing we are firmly grounded in obedience to our Creator's authority will give us the courage we need to persevere, and to bring many with us through the trials of life.