

Have Courage: United We Stand, Divided We Fall

Esther 4:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:10

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A lion used to prowl around a field where four oxen dwelled.
(<https://leadchange.org/it-takes-courage-and-character-to-unify-people/>)

Many times he would try to eat them, but whenever he approached, the four oxen would back their tails up to each other with their bodies pointed outward in different directions. (Ibid)

No matter what direction the lion approached, he was met by the horns of one of the oxen and the lion could do nothing to harm them. (Ibid)

At last, the oxen fell to quarreling amongst themselves, and so each went off to a pasture of his or her own in a separate corner of the field. Then the lion attacked them one by one and soon made an end to all four. (Ibid)

This story is over 2500 years old, but the moral of the story forms the basis for one of the most famous sayings in our country: "United We Stand, Divided We Fall." (Ibid)

When our country was in its infancy, the lion was Britain. The Mother Country was trying to squash all attempts by the colonists to exert their independence.

They tried to make an example out of a few to keep the masses in line.

It took courage for the colonists to stay together. It took more courage for them to speak out against the British.

One of those that spoke out was John Dickinson. John lived in the pre-Revolutionary War era and can be counted as one of our founding fathers.

In July 1768, he wrote this catchy line in a war song called "The Liberty Song." In that song were these words:

"Then join hand in hand/
Brave Americans all!
By uniting we stand/
By dividing we fall!"

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_we_stand,_divided_we_fall)

So, not only can you trace this phrase back millenniums, but you can also trace it back to the beginning of our country.

We are all familiar with Patrick Henry, an American attorney, planter and orator, most famous for his line, "Give me liberty or give me death."

In the last public speech Patrick Henry gave in March 1799, his issue was not whether a state had rights, but were the rights of states greater than those of the federal government on matters outside the Constitution.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky_and_Virginia_Resolutions)

Clasping his hands and swaying unsteadily, Henry said, "Let us trust God, and our better judgment to set us right hereafter. United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs."

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_we_stand,_divided_we_fall)

In each of these examples, there was a crisis. There was a threat.

The lion wanted to eat the oxen.

The British wanted to keep the colonist under their rule.

The states wanted more power than the Federal Government.

Any time there is a threat to the unity of the body, whether it's a country, a school, a family, a business, or a church, we must have enough courage to name the threat, whether it is from without or within and protect the body from being torn apart.

The greatest threat today to our own country may not be from Iran, Russia, or North Korea. It might be from within. Instead of banding together as Americans, we are polarized and few are willing name us as the threat because we are too busy naming the other political party.

This kind of name calling and finger pointing has begun to seep into the crevices of many other areas of our lives, including our churches. The devil is delighted.

There is a threat here to us all. It threatens to unhinge us. I ask you this morning to take a lesson from the oxen and not allow it to happen.

In December 1944, six months after D-Day, an infantry division of the United States Army landed in France. During the cold and wet winter, the soldiers traveled across France and Belgium.

(<https://www.beth-tzedec.org/page/sermons/a/display/s/1/item/we-are-all-jews-a-passover-story-of-courage-pesah-day-2-1-april-2018-16-nisan-5778>)

On December 16, 1944, the Germans attacked Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds' regiment in a counter-offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge. (Ibid)

Though outgunned and outmanned, the Americans delayed the Germans long enough to allow General George Patton's Third Army to come to the rescue. (Ibid)

However, the rescue came too late for Edmonds' regiment. They were encircled and taken prisoner along with 20,000 other American soldiers. (Ibid)

On January 27, 1945, a Major Siegmann, the commandant of Stalag IX-A instructed all Jewish POWs to report the next morning. By this time, they were well aware that the Germans were murdering Jews and they understood separating the Jews from the other POWs would put them in great danger. (Ibid)

“There was no question in Sgt. Edmonds mind that the Germans were removing the Jewish prisoners from the general prisoner population at great risk to their survival so he ordered all 1,292 of his soldiers to stand together when the Jewish prisoners were to report.” (Ibid)

One of his fellow soldiers Paul Stern, described it this way: “There were more than one thousand Americans standing in wide formation in front of the barracks, with Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds standing in front of the formation with several senior noncoms beside him, of which I was one.” (Ibid)

When Major Siegmann, the German officer in charge saw that all the camp’s inmates were standing in front of their barracks, he turned to Edmonds and said, “They cannot all be Jews.” (Ibid)

“We are all Jews,” Edmonds replied. (Ibid)

“Although seventy years have passed,” said Stern, “I can still hear the words he said to the German camp commander.”

“We are all Jews here.” (Ibid)

The German officer jammed his pistol to the forehead of Edmonds and said, “I’ll give you one more chance. Have the Jewish men step forward or I will shoot you on the spot.” (Ibid)

Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds responded, “According to the Geneva Convention, we have to give only our name, rank, and serial number. If you shoot me, you will have to shoot all of us. The war is almost over, and after the war, you will be tried for war crimes. We are all Jews here.” (Ibid)

The German officer stalked away. Two hundred Jewish GIs were among the almost 1300 American POWs. Their lives were saved by Edmonds’ act of courage and by the awareness that international law meant something. (Ibid)

Eventually, the American soldiers were liberated.

Edmonds lived out the motto and taught it to his men: “United we stand, divided we fall.” (<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/bible-stories-about-faith-5-great-scripture-summaries/#ixzz5P2BbP5fx>)

Tonight, Kevin Charles will be ordained as a deacon, and the deacons will reaffirm their covenant. Part of their deacon covenant says: "While at times I may disagree, I will not act disagreeably." This is the Baptist spirit that keeps us united.

When we turn to the Bible for inspiration for courage, it's hard to find a better example than a woman named Esther.

An Old Testament book bears her name. Esther is a book that tells the story of a young Jewish woman who was drafted into the harem of Xerxes, King of Persia. Because she was Jewish, she was an unlikely choice. More unlikely still was the fact that she eventually became the Queen.

The man that adopted Esther when she was younger was Mordecai. From the day Esther was drafted in the King's harem, he came to the gate regularly to check on her.

However, in doing so, Mordecai angered Haman, a powerful noble who was an advisor to the King.

Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman, and this made him furious.

Haman becomes so angry that he decided to punish Mordecai and all of his people – the Jews. He wanted to annihilate all of them.

Up to this point Esther had been able to keep her Jewish heritage a secret. But now, Mordecai turned to her for help.

He got a message to her and asked her to intervene. He asked her to use her influence to avoid a possible genocide.

As you might expect, Esther was reluctant. She was afraid for her own life.

Then Mordecai sent her this message:

“Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4: 13-14 (NIV))

“For such a time as this,” is a phrase that has given men and women courage in difficult times. Like the words, “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” this phrase has encouraged people to take a stand on principle, to stand for justice, to stand for what's right. Perhaps these words will encourage you this morning.

This morning, will you consider that God may have placed you in a specific place for a specific purpose?

Sometimes what God asks of us is not easy. However, if God is with you, God will see you through.

Esther took the risk and gained an audience with the king, and the evil intentions of Haman were exposed.

The king's response was rapid.

When he found out the evil intentions of Haman, he ordered him to hang on the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai.

The Jews were saved.

Mordecai was elevated to Xerxes' second-in-command.

Also, Esther, once a poor Jewish child, having saved her people, continued to live as Queen of the super-power of her day.

This morning, if you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a closed room with a mosquito.

If you think you have no courage, think about a young Jewish woman who dared to approach a King and ended up saving the Jews.

If you think you have no courage, think of a young POW who had a gun to his head and said, "We are all Jews here."

When you think about our church, please remember, we are all First Baptist Church members here.

We are one church that worships one Lord, crucified, buried, and resurrected, who has breathed the Holy Spirit into each one who professes Him as Lord and Savior.

We are one church that serves one Lord, who studies the Bible together through one Sunday school.

We are one church, with one vision. We have worked together and formed one Future Story.

We give to one budget and have one staff. We have one committee structure and one body of deacons.

Like a large number of churches that I know, we are trying to reach one very large lost world through more than one kind of worship service.

The same message is preached in both services. The same Spirit of God is present in both.

It is up to you to embrace both and to pray for both and to be happy and thankful to God that He should bless both because if one is blessed, the whole is blessed, and the kingdom is blessed.

People who exercise courage learn that there is something bigger going on than just one's own wants, wishes, and desires.

If you think words don't matter, or don't believe concepts matter, think about these words that have endured millenniums and have inspired generations, including our country, "United we stand and divided we fall."

The oxen forgot that and the lions picked them off one by one.

We owe the beginnings of our country to people like John Robinson and Patrick Henry who learned this lesson.

Two hundred Jewish soldiers owe their lives to Roddie Edmonds because he believed so much in unity that he was willing to lay down his life for that principal.

The Jews might not even have been around had Esther not believed that unity was worth her courage.

So now, as we move forward as a church, it is time that we bond together more than ever before and remember these words, from the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth: ¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10 NIV)

So lay aside your politics. Lay aside your selfish agendas. Don't sweat the small stuff. Instead, focus on Jesus. Focus on the kingdom of Christ. Focus on the needs of a lost community that needs a church that's committed to its vision, and who loves one another. Wherever you see that not happening, have some courage to remind people, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall."

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