

## Fortitude

‘He who loves his life will lose it.’ (JN 12:25)

‘Because we are vulnerable we can be brave,’ says Joseph Pieper. CAN be brave. The truth is—most of us are cowards who seek first to preserve our lives from further wounding. Persons who demonstrate fortitude give up their lives to follow Jesus; they entrust to Him the diminishment they experience from others and somehow thrive on His nourishment, especially in suffering. When the battle gets harder, brave Christians get better. Through Jesus. For Jesus. Let me give you three examples of fortitude in action.

Sara married young to a fellow Asian, a Christian, who deserted her for another woman. She could not agree to dissolve the marriage as she made vows not just to a man but to the Man. For fifty years, she has stayed faithful to God and to the man she still considers her husband. Robert Gagnon is an Ivy League scholar who wrote the best book ever on ‘The Bible and Homosexual Practice’ (Abingdon Press). Over the course of his academic career, he has been reviled by peers while his work remains the gold standard. Sue entered into lesbianism after an abusive childhood in England. She sought spiritual answers and became a Buddhist nun. In Thailand she met Jesus, the Man of her dreams who equipped her to become a healing missionary. Surrounded by the heavenly host, a compromised church, and a gang of sinners who are becoming saints, she delights in partnering with Jesus to awaken hearts from the drowsy idolatry/immorality of Thailand.

Three factors mark each of their lives. First, they suffer because of what is right, not because of foolish daring. Sara believes she made a vow until death. She’s not dead yet and cannot in good conscience yield to the men who have wanted her. Robert stands on a profound understanding of God’s will for the sexual redemption of persons. Period. He cannot change that truth even if popular opinion does. Sue must be faithful to God’s call, however difficult that call is. The failure of others does not negate God faithfulness and call on her life.

Their diminishment in battle has not resulted in death—martyrdom—which is the highest honor accorded to persons possessed by fortitude. These three major on endurance, a second facet of fortitude; they sustain ‘little deaths’ as they endure shame for the joy set before them. No grim-faced sufferers these—each exercise what Pieper describes as ‘a vigorous grasping and clinging to the good’, namely holding fast to the little cross Jesus has asked of them as He steadies them with His Cross. Endurance for them is neither passive nor mournful but active, drawing water from an unseen but very real Source. And joyful! I have seen each of these three in serious hardship but never once succumb to self-pity, a third mark of fortitude. They refuse to be broken by grief; their losses and tears draw them closer to Jesus.

For us all, fortitude frees us to face our vulnerability in faith; we entrust ourselves to the One who does not promise freedom from injury and sorrow but freedom for Himself. He makes us alive in the fight for what is authentically good and true and beautiful. The battle prepares us for heaven.

Sara has a Bridegroom who awaits her; she is making herself ready for Him. Robert's reward is thousands who through his work 'run in the path of God's commands' (PS 119:32) and who teach others so. Sue is Jesus' presence for a harassed people who under her care come clean from sin and demons. Fortitude frees her to prepare a tribe for heaven, for Jesus. Those who lose their lives find them, many times over.