

CHAPTER 2

LET GO OF FEAR

COURAGE QUOTE

Courage is laying down our fears and embracing our faith.

COURAGE VERSE

*For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love
and self-control.*

—2 Timothy 1:7, ESV



By many standards, Mike and I had an enviable life: two great kids, a lovely home, successful business, and active involvement in our church and community. There was no denying that Mike and I loved each other. We had just made so many poor choices along the way. The fabric of our relationship was torn and tattered, in desperate need of repair, but neither of us really knew where or how to begin.

We were a mess, and maybe the most tragic part was nobody knew. We were so good at hiding the deterioration of our marriage, nobody had a clue how dangerously close we were to ending it. In fact, many viewed us as the perfect storybook couple.

Looking for Love

I met Mike White on the first day of school at Milton High, shortly after my family moved to Georgia. Not knowing the social rules of my new school, I dressed up for my first day, wearing a skirt, blouse, and heels. In the land of blue jeans, I stood out. Mike smiled at me and offered to walk me to class. A few months later, we both participated in a Christmas play, and that was it. I was fourteen years old and on my way to being hopelessly in love.

Mike was charismatic, warm, cute, upbeat, and fun—and he was a senior. My lowly freshman status didn't seem to matter to him, and I found myself comfortably lost in his aura of confidence. Mike genuinely cared for me, and he regularly found ways to demonstrate his growing affection. He quickly became my savior in nearly every sense of the word, a role no human being should occupy.

He helped me escape my family's brokenness and protected me from a frequently volatile dad. He made me look good and feel accepted. Mike gave me an identity. Over the years, he gave me two beautiful children and provided for us in ways I never dreamed possible.

What he couldn't give me was courage to take the growing stack of unhealthy, worldly lies I was constructing around myself—particularly the lie that any human being could ever meet all of my needs—and replace them with healthy, scriptural truth. Mike couldn't help me make fearless, courageous choices. But, in his defense, that wasn't his job.

It's no one else's job to help us make good choices and set healthy boundaries; that responsibility falls on our own shoulders. My husband was making choices based on his own belief system—on what he felt was right—not considering the emotional stability (or occasional instability) of his wife. That isn't to say he intentionally ignored or purposefully disrespected my feelings; he just didn't grasp the weight of responsibility I placed in his lap. Mike is an amazing man, but it's not easy to live up to savior status.

The fact that I came into our marriage with a boatload of boundary issues wasn't something either of us understood. I didn't comprehend

(and certainly couldn't articulate) how I had developed a fear-based mentality as a child, or why I had now grown into an adult controlled by fear and a detrimental need for acceptance. And I certainly didn't know how I could stop.

Stop the Insanity

It's time to learn how to stop. If we truly wish to find courage, we must intentionally get off the roller coaster and stop the endless cycle of ups and downs that occur when we make fear-based choices. Fear is a natural emotion designed by God. But living with a spirit of fear is *not* from God.

If you are struggling with a challenging relationship, difficult situation, or even with memories from a painful past, it's important to know God wants to give you courage to overcome any obstacle in life. God wants to help us stop making fearful choices.

Although Mike and I both made poor choices over the years, my ability to find courage and walk in grace wasn't dependent on him acknowledging or accepting any part he played in the scenario. My ultimate freedom depended first and foremost on how willing I was to stop my own negative behaviors.

Ouch.

Yes, Mike's ability and willingness to accept responsibility for his choices were vital in our healing as a couple, but it's an important distinction to make that our ability to be hopeful and courageous is not dependent on the choices others may or may not make.

I was sitting in a hotel room in Israel when I took my first courageous step, when I followed the Spirit-filled conviction to step out in faith and commit to change. I knew it was time for me to accept responsibility for my part in the dramatic dysfunction and own it. It was time for me to stop the insanity of repeating the same behavior and expecting different results. It was time for me to get off the hamster wheel of insanity.

How about you? Is it your time to join me?

A Phone Call Ends, a New Life Begins

The heated, long-distance phone conversation I had with Mike that first night in Israel exhausted me. I sat on the hotel bed afterward and cried. In addition to feeling defeated and hopeless, I was distraught, depressed, and isolated.

In the midst of these overwhelming feelings, God—in His abundant mercy and grace—reached down to give me the supernatural courage I needed to follow a new path of change. This is when He convicted me to write the note that changed everything. Listen to the Holy Spirit. Is He convicting you now that something needs to change?

After I divulged our troubled marriage to our pastor and his wife, I didn't know how I was going to tell Mike. But I soon learned I didn't need to know, because God did, and He began to work almost immediately. After I delivered the note to Janet and got back to my room, Mike and I got back on the phone, and I mustered the courage to tell him what I did.

I felt unusually calm afterward, like a tremendous weight had been lifted. He wasn't happy, not by a long shot, but I think he sensed something had changed in my resolve. To his credit, Mike didn't retreat in anger, and by the end of our conversation, we proactively planned what was going to happen next. We agreed to see a counselor when I returned. Our marriage wasn't miraculously healed overnight, but at least we had agreed to move in a healthier direction.

However, the feelings of exhilaration disappeared by the next morning. I tried really hard to act normal and happy, but in reality, I was a nervous wreck and did my best to avoid Johnny and Janet. Even though my note prompted Mike and me to finally discuss seeking professional help as a couple, the fleeting courage I had the previous night was gone. Frankly, I felt terribly exposed and embarrassed.

After finally coming clean, I wanted to hide, to disappear. I had no idea what to do or say. Do I act normal now? What does normal even look like? I didn't know how to act, and I felt guilty for dumping this issue on our friends. What I really longed to do was go back into hiding and

pretend everything was okay again. But I couldn't; the truth was out, and there was no taking it back. Thank God.

During our first excursion of the day, I tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible, but my raw emotional state eventually bubbled to the surface. The experience of being in God's Holy Land was profound for many of us on the trip, so being overwhelmed with emotion didn't seem out of place as I walked away from the group at one point to try and compose myself. I think people assumed I was simply caught up in the moment.

It was then that my pastor and his wife found their own window of opportunity and reached out to privately offer words of wisdom and support: "Ann, we love you and Mike. We will do whatever we can to help you both get the help you need. You're not alone." We talked briefly before they returned to the group, and I thanked God for giving me the courage to reach out and ask for help.

After taking a few more minutes to compose myself, I rejoined our group with a fresh resolution to enjoy the time I had in Israel with my son and to absorb as much of God's truth as my heart and soul would allow.

A few days later, I was baptized in the Jordan River. As I stood in the same body of water that once covered my Savior, I knew the Spirit of God was washing me clean, reminding me I am not defined by my choices: "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."¹

While I knew I had a long way to go to heal from damaged emotions, I also realized God calls me His beloved (Colossians 3:12) and to Him I am pleasing, no matter what mistakes I have made or how painful the memories are that threaten to destroy my peace and strangle my joy.

The Breakthrough

We live in an era where disposable relationships are acceptable, where going the distance is often viewed as a race far too difficult to run—particularly when the distance is fraught with gale-force winds. While

this is true in all close relationships, it's especially true in marriage. Staying married these days, even in the best of times, isn't easy. Staying married when storms threaten is even harder.

Retreating from the torrential downpour of poor choices and painful consequences is often the easiest choice. Yet taking the easy way out isn't necessarily the wisest, or the healthiest, way out. Sometimes we have to jump boldly into the deep end of the pool to rescue what is important to us. I thank God my husband is a bold man who was willing to jump.

That isn't to say he is a perfect man, any more than I am a perfect woman. We are both just children of a mighty God who knows what it's like to struggle to keep our heads above water to survive, just as we know what it feels like to see the shore of salvation in the distance.

It is through God's grace and mercy I have become a courageous woman. And I'm deeply blessed to be married to an equally courageous man who is also walking his own journey of faith, forgiveness, and grace.

It's impossible to describe the love and respect I feel for my husband as he has fought valiantly alongside me to restore "what the locust has eaten."² Although his personal journey is not mine to tell, I can tell you that on June 17, 2012, my husband rededicated his life to the Lord. I can tell you we are communicating in a way I never dreamed possible. And I can tell you we have both found the courage to change, through God's miraculous love.

One of the biggest challenges many of us who seek courage must overcome is our fearful need to hide and pretend. However, being courageous does not mean it's necessary to disclose our life history to everyone we meet. While it's good to be transparent and vulnerable, there is a time and place for it.

As Mike and I continue to navigate new paths of honesty and trust on our journey as husband and wife, I respect Mike's request that we not divulge all the particulars about our personal life in this book, just as he respects my choice to be as transparent and vulnerable as possible. Together, we are learning the value of balance in healthy disclosure.

My amazing husband and I are a walking testimony to God's saving grace. As we continue to heal, God is shaping and molding us into the individuals He wants us to be. He is teaching us what emotional triggers look like, how we can approach them in a healthy way, and how He wants us to use our experience to touch the lives of other broken couples and individuals. Mostly, He is teaching us what forgiveness really looks like.

In her *Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook*, author June Hunt has this to say about forgiveness and finding courage in all of our relationships in life:

Do choose as an act of will to forgive. Forgiving someone does not necessarily mean you must forget. The key is how the offense will be remembered. Forgiving is remembering without bitterness, hatred, or resentment. "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13 NIV 1984).³

Without a doubt, God's grace has enfolded me in a protective shield of love and forgiveness that has allowed me to walk in true purpose and experience a miraculous healing in my marriage.

God started me on the journey to find courage when my life and marriage were at their lowest point. Today, I continue to apply and demonstrate the seven steps to COURAGE, and my marriage is the strongest it has ever been.

Is it perfect? No. There is no such thing as a perfect relationship, whether it's with a spouse, family member, or friend. The only perfect relationship we will ever have is with the Almighty, and because one-half of that couple will always struggle with worldly imperfections, even that relationship will forever be in stages of development. And that's how it should be. A personal relationship with our Creator is an organic entity that grows as we do, and the more we choose intimacy with God, the closer we will grow in understanding the kind of healthy intimacy He wants us to experience with Him, with ourselves, and with others.

Since I began to apply the seven steps to COURAGE, Mike and I have both grown closer to God and to each other. We are a miraculous work in progress. We are committed, and we remain deeply in love. God continues to work in and on us.

United in Courage

The Hebrew word for courage is *chazaq*, which literally means “to show oneself strong,” and it appears numerous times in Scripture. The Bible provides many rich examples of courage. Throughout God’s Word, we see miraculous accounts of God accomplishing great deeds through ordinary people.⁴

As Mike and I continue our individual journeys, walking with courage and living in grace, we have witnessed a miraculous change, not only in our marriage but in all of our relationships. We’ve been able to move forward in restorative freedom, a freedom that enables us to experience closeness and connection on a new level. We’ve grown stronger.

Is this freedom and strength what you long for? Then get out your notebook and let’s go further in our journey together.

COURAGE CALL-TO-ACTION STEPS



1. Draw a vertical line down the center of one page in your notebook and use these column headers: Courage and Fear. Now, take a self-inventory. In the appropriate column, list the ways you exhibit courage and/or fear. There are no right or wrong answers. This is a stream-of-consciousness exercise designed to identify strengths and weaknesses to prepare for courageous changes.
2. Spend quiet time with the Lord confessing relationships in your life where you struggle to forgive, including your relationship with yourself. Then ask God to help you as you begin to courageously embrace forgiveness in these relationships.