Strength for Your Soul Series

Let Courage In

Elizabeth Mitchell

For our
five children -
my best teachers ever

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1598 SW 5th Avenue. Boca Raton, FL. 33432
www.elizabethamitchell.com

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Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/billelizabeth.mitchell
Instagram: @elizabeth.a.k.mitchell

Introduction

Have you ever felt that not even Jesus can straighten out your stuff? Jairus and Peter did. Many times. The crowds with their pressing needs had placed obstacles in Jairus' path, and though Jesus had promised to come to his aid, it hadn't helped one bit.

But Jesus was still in the picture, and he infused courage into Jairus with these words: "Do not fear, only believe." Jesus gives us the very same message today. Have courage right where you are, right there in the middle of the mess, in the very place you don't want to be.

Jesus is never bound by what appears to be impossible. He never wrings his hands and wonders what the solution might possibly be. Jesus himself is always the solution.

He will help us face whatever is charging down the pike and lurking around the bend. He enlarges our hearts with courage of the divine kind. Christ is ruler of all things visible and invisible. He has a clear pur-

pose for everything he designed and will ensure that even trials line up accordingly.

Courage is hanging onto him, keeping our eyes locked on his promises, leaning against the rock-steady frame of his presence, and entrusting every one of our cares into the hands that were extended on the cross.

The essays that follow are all facets of courage, of learning to trust him like those men and women of old who brushed against the Savior when dust clung to his feet and wrinkles marked his robe.

Go ahead, open up the window of your heart, and let in the all-sufficient strength of Christ's amazing courage.

> "Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the Lord."
> Psalm 31:24

Still in the Picture

> "Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly..."
>
> (Mark 5:22)

We know Jairus' story as one with a happy ending. And yet, when we first meet this distraught father in Mark 5, he has no assurance his horrible dilemma will conclude well. At a point in history void of medical specialists or advance treatment centers, his young daughter is deathly ill. The man has wealth, status, and connections at his disposal, but their ranking is of little consequence with his beloved child "at the point of death."

Jairus throws himself before Christ like a desperate beggar. He "implored him earnestly" to "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." Jesus does not hesitate. Immediately he accommodates Jairus' request.

But obstacles interfere. Crowds of people are pressing in, blocking a swift return home. A woman dealing with her own enormous health issues stops Jesus in his tracks as she reaches out in faith to touch his garment. While Jesus is occupied with her dramatic healing and engaged in meaningful discourse with her, the clock is ticking like a bomb waiting to detonate.

The servants appear and relay the tragic news that is Jairus' nightmare: his daughter has died. Jairus' plan to save her has failed. Nothing has transpired the way he anticipated. Jesus was distracted, and others received the miracle he wanted for his daughter. All is lost now, futile, forlorn. Not even Jesus can help him now!

Ever compassionate and mindful, Christ overhears the servants' update and speaks five words to the man he had made a promise to earlier in the day. "Do not fear, only believe." Jairus, I am not constrained by your present reality. I am not bound by what appears impossible. Others are telling you that no hope remains, but do not listen to them. Listen to me. I promised I would go with you, and I am by your side. I am still in this picture.

Nowhere along the road to Jairus' home did Jesus wring his hands and worry about what lay ahead. Regardless of the length of the journey, the pressing crowds, or the desperate situation at hand, the Lord knew the end from the very beginning.

Our good God still controls the outcome of our lives, too. As we make our way down the road and around the bend today, as we wait for him to transform our particular stories, he strengthens us with the same words that bolstered Jairus all those years ago. "Do not fear, only believe."

Echo of Our Heart

"But he said emphatically, 'If I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And they all said the same."

(Mark 14:31)

When Peter spoke those infamous words, Christ loved him nonetheless. His was a bold and courageous determination to defend the Lord at all costs. I believe Peter thought he would be capable of carrying out his commitment as this surge of bravado coursed through his veins. Nothing would deter him from keeping his promise to the Master. The disciple's words sprung from a heart completely convinced that come hell or high water he could never deny Jesus or leave him out in the cold.

But he did both.

Hell and high water bared their ugly teeth, and Peter's stalwart resolution disappeared in the ferocious clash. Long before he ever denied Christ in the courtyard, Peter fell asleep in the garden without bringing

Jesus one drop of comfort. He wanted to be brave, had every intention of carrying out his commitment, but after Jesus' arrest Peter panicked and hid in the murky shadows of the city bent on Christ's destruction.

We hear in Peter's words an echo of our own heart. In comfortable, padded pews and inspiring retreat centers we pledge to walk close to Christ, to sacrifice for the cause of the gospel, to be obedient to his Word. Determined, we listen to resounding sermons and powerful Bible lessons, convinced we too will follow him regardless of the cost.

But we fail sometimes.

Like Peter, we face insurmountable odds and run scared. We forget our vows and become like the frightened fisherman hiding in the smoke-filled Jerusalem courtyard. Pride trips us up, and we sprawl head first on the pavement of upended promises.

Christ came to Peter by the familiar Sea of Galilee and restored the disciple's faith. Christ forgave his enormous blunder and reinstated the disciple; he will forgive us too.

The Lord knows our wobbly hearts and weak knees. As we ask, he will help us face whatever is charging down the pike or lurking around the bend. As we continue to rely heavily on his Word, to walk humbly before him, and to cling to the strength he alone provides, we can trust the Lord for every step ahead, regardless.

Shape of the Vessel

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."

(I Peter 4:12)

We are befuddled when trials poke their noses into our lives. We cringe at their unwelcome presence, startled that we are made to experience pain, aggravations, or inconveniences. We live under the misguided assumption that since we are children of the Almighty he will buffer us from all kinds of suffering. Usually, we are ill prepared and put out by it all.

The comparison that comes to mind is of a pregnant woman taken by surprise at the prospect of going into labor. Although she has been "expecting" a baby for nine months, she is suddenly bewildered at the thought that intense labor and delivery are actually involved in this pregnancy process. We would think her

completely irrational if her words were, "I can't believe God would ask me to go into labor!"

We are just as ludicrous if we presume that suffering is not part and parcel of a Christian's life.

In that vein, the apostle Peter addresses us tenderly as "Beloved" and urges us to expect testing. We are to anticipate that they will arrive in one fashion or another and ultimately to understand that they are a test God has allowed. No scholar is surprised that tests are a routine part of school. No Christian should be caught by surprise in this regard, either.

When he tests us, he is revealing to us what is in our heart and the strength of our faith. Peter experienced his overwhelming share of testing and was in the perfect position to challenge us to be prepared for ours.

Trials and testing are inevitable. The Master is warning us so we can be prepared.

In a way God is saying, "Will you hold this burden for me? You may not understand now why I am asking this of you. You need not understand, really. I promise you I will bring good from what you are enduring. My Scriptures are packed with many such outcomes. If you will allow me, I will bring glory to my name through this."

"As you endure this cumbersome, unwelcome trial, it will shape you into a vessel I will use for an eternal purpose. Trust me on this. Take the focus off of what is happening to you and look ahead to what I will accomplish through you."

In light of this, Peter finishes this portion of his letter with a necessary reminder: "Therefore, let those

who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (I Peter 4:19).

Our Creator has a clear purpose for everything he designed. He will ensure that even trials line up accordingly.

Half-Penny Assistance

"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk."

(Acts 3:6)

He wasn't asking for much. The beggar was used to being ignored, stepped over, marginalized. But if, somehow, he could get the attention of a few as they made their way into the temple, if they stopped for a moment and threw a coin his way, it was worth the ask.

Considered defective from the moment of his birth, the beggar had never ventured inside the temple. For an eternity of years, he had only watched from a distance. Friends brought him close to the action, laid him at the Beautiful Gate, but that was as far as he got. Over the years the man with the broken body had learnt to be content to ask for help from his lowly position, outside of it all.

When the beggar spotted Peter and John, he asked for a half-penny of what they had to offer. The apos-

tles stopped, laid aside their plans for prayer, and took the time necessary to gaze at the one who had nothing to offer them.

"Look at us," Peter directed. The beggar was thrilled! Two men had actually noticed him, and "he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them" (Acts 3:5). Surely, if they stopped to look at him, to talk to him, they would provide him with a coin or two. This is exactly what the beggar wanted to happen. This was good. His plan was working today.

Peter spoke with the conviction that Jesus Christ had everything the beggar needed.

> "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!", Peter declared, taking the beggar's right hand and raising him off the ground. The Scriptures tell us "immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God"
>
> (Acts 3:7-8).

The crippled man becomes our teacher.

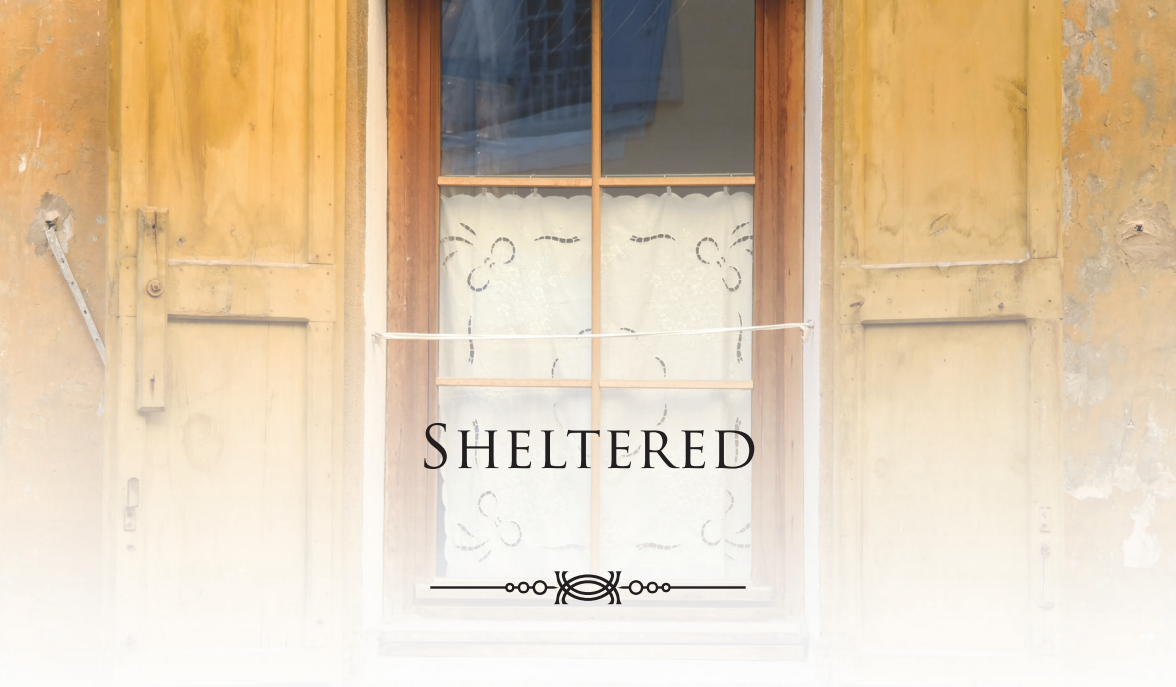
We, too, approach God with downcast eyes, present our pressing needs, and ask timidly for a half-penny of his assistance. Slouched, paralyzed and overwhelmed by our lack, we beg for alms from God, just a half-penny in order to get by.

But he desires for us to gaze intently at him, to take in the wonder of who he is and what he alone is capable of accomplishing. Ask me for more, he tells

us. Do not settle for alms. I am the God who raises up beggars to leap and dance inside temple walls.

I am the Lord Jesus Christ with the authority to restore all your paralyzed places, all your sores, all the broken places no one else sees.

Direct your gaze to me, Jesus tells us. Let me raise you up off the ground.



SHELTERED

"Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us even as we hope in you."

(Psalm 33:20-22)

At a particularly challenging season in your life, was there at least one determined friend or family member who stood by your side, refusing to leave you to weather the elements on your own?

Did that brother hoist an enormous barrier above your head to break the wind and pelting rain? Was there one faithful companion who guarded you as if her life was crafted for this unique task, who ensured you would make that next step, and the one after that when it came?

Somewhere in that difficult period, were you aware that there was a person cheering you on to the finish

line, who lifted you on his shoulders to carry you to the end after you had stumbled awkwardly and lay splattered on the ground?

Were you conscious in the tumult, that one soul cared for you and would do anything in her power to help you arrive safely at the destination that seemed far beyond you?

You would be considered quite fortunate indeed to have been flanked by such a friend, to have been loved so well. Consider this–the one we call Immanuel, God with us, was not just acutely aware of your dilemma, but was fully present with the capacity to strengthen, uphold and overrule.

In him we have a Brother that will never leave our side.

In his hands we are safe, sheltered by his might and matchless authority. With Jesus interceding for us, we have a great High Priest imploring Almighty God to come to our aid (Romans 8:34). He is Counselor and Helper, Protector and Guide, Ruler of all things visible and invisible to our naked eye.

He empowers through his Word, enlarging our hearts with courage of the divine kind.

For the times we stagger like lost sheep, he is the Good Shepherd, carrying and protecting us from harm. When parched fields lay ahead, he is Living Water drenching through and through. If unjust treatment is our lot, he is the Righteous Judge who has the final say. Malnourished and needy, he is the Bread of Life who satisfies and fills.

When your love has reassigned her affections to another, he is the Father who loves without condition.

Though we are undone by our broken places, he is not. He is still Savior for those troublesome onslaughts.

> "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine"
>
> (Psalm 33:18-19).

Strong Tower

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."
(Psalm 124:8)

Heavy-hearted and under siege, we hunker down and hide, fearful of the onslaught from the enemy intent on our destruction. At the very least, he plots to capture us in his cavern of discouragement by providing a hundred reasons why self-pity is the reasonable choice at present. We must retaliate with the wisdom found in the wellspring of the Word. Our Lord fought him with truth; we flourish if we imitate our Savior's example and do battle in his name.

We reinforce our trembling hearts with the stalwart reminder that "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 124:8). We must recall that the Lord is "on our side" (Psalm 124:1) and will prevent us from being "swallowed alive" (Psalm 124:3) by any flood of accusations or torrential raging waters triggered against us.

His name is fuel for the fight; his character is fire by night and cloud cover from the burning rays at noon.

We call him our Shepherd, and with staff in hand he wards off wolves that approach with wicked schemes to huff and puff and blow our houses down. We experience him as the Great Physician with the capacity to heal layers deep and treat us with the fortifying tonic of his Word.

He is called Light because he permeates every drop of darkness that would encroach on our future and all underhanded attempts to block our view of him.

He is the Lion of Judah with massive power to overcome our difficulties; his invincible strength accompanies us on the winding journeys we each take. As sovereign King, he overrules and undertakes–every troubling thought may be taken captive in the throne room of grace and mercy.

We find him as our refuge to hide behind when we are hounded or harassed. When we cry for help, our heavenly Father rescues us with the strength and certainty of a loving parent on ready alert around the clock and the calendar.

Towering above everything that concerns us, our Lord safely ensures our deliverance even if we limp toward him badly bruised and worn. Since he created heaven and earth all by himself, we can be fully confident that time and again, as we choose to run to him for help, he will faithfully orchestrate all the details of our own world as well.

Yours to Command

"On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'"

(Mark 4:35)

Of course, you could sleep. The water filling the boat would not terrify you. From your viewpoint, what's the difference between calm or turbulent seas? The prevailing ocean winds are yours to command.

Of course, you had to sleep. You were weary with exhaustion from the relentless demands imposed by needy people. Fully human, your body collapsed on a cushion in the stern of the wooden vessel as it traveled across the Galilean sea.

In the darkened evening shadows, the rhythm of the waves rocked you. You were neither alarmed nor distraught when your terrified friends disturbed your slumber and accused you of not caring about them.

First things first–immediately you rebuked the storm, and it responded like a well-trained pet to its master's

command. You spoke to the waves and the wind, and they listened; they obey no one else. Neither high-ranking navy commanders nor sea captains would ever have the audacity to tell a storm to shut its mouth.

But you can–you did.

Your nervous disciples had forgotten what you had told them earlier in the day. They had not taken you seriously when you said, "Let us go across to the other side" (Mark 4:35). You had made a promise, and you always keep those. You made it very clear that you were going with them in the boat, and that together you would make it to the other side.

Having you in the boat came with the guarantee that regardless of wind intensity or rising water, you would see to it that they arrived safely.

After you dealt with the winds, you turned your attention to your sopping-wet, scared friends and rebuked them as well. "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:30). After seeing me silence the demons, heal the leper, show mercy to the paralytic, and preach my heart out about the kingdom of heaven, after all this, did you still not believe in me? After spending so much time with me, did you truly believe I did not care about you?

Followers of mine, I want you to always remember this–when I am with you in the boat, the condition of the sea is never a concern.

Conclusion

Life demands that we have courage. God provides it. The Scriptures offer us hope that in spite of it all, regardless of what comes our way or the journeys we must take, that the Lord is our defender, provider and rescuer. We can be unshakably confident in his ability to give us his grace to endure and to overcome.

We can trust him. I want you to experience that truth deep down in your soul. May the essays I shared and the Scriptures that inspired each one, be a source of renewal and courage for all the days to come.

Remember, as you open up the window of your heart to let courage in,

- The Lord strengthens you with "Do not fear, only believe."

- Our Heavenly Father will help you face whatever is charging down the pike or lurking around the bend.

- Take the focus off of what is happening to you and look ahead to what Christ will accomplish through you.

- Jesus tells you to direct your gaze to him and let him raise you off the ground.

- Though you are undone by your broken places, God is not.

- Our Lord safely ensures your deliverance even if you limp toward him badly bruised and worn.

- When Christ is with you in the boat, the condition of the sea is never a concern.

My prayer for you is…

Father: I pray for those who read these words, that you will make them aware in a hundred different ways that you are with them every step of the way. May you give them courage to lean on you, look to you, wait for you to work out the details in your perfect time.

Father I pray that all of our hearts will be marked by an unshakable awareness that you are completely capable to carry us through whatever you have asked us to face. May our dependence on you and our faith in you be the hallmark of our lives, today and every day ahead. Amen

About Elizabeth

Jesus is always more than enough, no matter what.

Elizabeth wants that truth to reach the hearts of those who read her devotional blogs or engage with her podcasts and talks. Although life forces us to trudge along with burdens, distractions, and wounds, Elizabeth points us in the direction of God's Word, his presence, and his all-sufficient control over all the world, and our own world as well.

Undoubtedly, Elizabeth is happiest whenever she gets to hang with her husband, their five children and three grandchildren. No global adventure or ministry opportunity, no matter how spectacular, tops being with her family in South Florida.

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Instagram: @elizabeth.a.k.mitchell