

## THE BARBARIAN REVOLT

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. (Matthew 11:12)

**N**ot long ago Aaron asked me, "Dad, would you purposefully put us in danger?"

"Yes," I answered, "of course."

Without blinking an eye his response was simply, "That's what I thought. I was just making sure." I could tell he was tying together all the pieces of his more recent travels. In retrospect, he could see more clearly the reality of the danger and volatility of which he had been in the midst.

I wonder how many of us have actually had this conversation with God: "Abba, Father, Dad, would You purposefully put me in danger?" I think a lot of us haven't asked God that question because we went ahead and answered it for Him. Of course He wouldn't do that. We're His children. We're family. He wouldn't purposefully endanger us, not even to accomplish a higher or nobler purpose. Or would He? Maybe you should stop and ask Him. His answer might surprise you. It certainly surprised John the Baptist.

There is a barbarian revolt taking place, and its command center is the kingdom of God. Everywhere the kingdom of God advances, there is a violent engagement against a dark kingdom. To be born of God is to be made a citizen in the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is at war. Do not confuse this kingdom with Paradise. Salvation is not reentry into a Paradise Lost; it is enlistment in the mission of God.

Jesus is telling us in no uncertain terms that there is a battle raging. This is perhaps the most important reason why we must choose the barbarian way and resist any temptation to become civilized. Domesticated Christians are far too willing to abdicate the battle for the soul of the world. Civility focuses our energy on all the wrong places. We spend

our lives emphasizing our personal development and spiritual well-being. We build churches that become nothing more than hiding places for the faithful while pretending that our actions are for the good of the world. Or we choose political and secular vehicles to try to advance our cultural values, strangely attempting to make unbelieving people act like civilized believers.

In contrast Jesus calls us to a different way. He tells us this is a battle of kingdoms. He insists that if we are His followers, we must not live in a world defined only by the material. We cannot limit our sights to what is flesh and blood. We should know better than that. To see from a kingdom perspective is to know that there is a conflict of invisible kingdoms and that people's lives are forever changed by what happens in the unseen. We are called to be warriors of light in dark places. We are mystical warriors who use weapons not of this world.

### A DIVINE INSURRECTION

For centuries the nations that have considered themselves civilized have chosen weapons that wield pain and destruction

on the weak and innocent. The Romans, borrowing the phrase from the Greeks, described as *barbarians* all who were not of Rome. And certainly the Romans exemplify the great virtues of civilization. From violence to decadence, they could justify the most cruel and base actions against all who were not a part of them since the "others" were beneath them.

It's appropriate that the first Christians were barbarians to Rome. History tells us there came a day when the same barbarians turned Rome upside down. Tragically it wasn't long before Rome seduced and civilized the early church. The church did, in fact, become Roman. The church became civilized. And soon the same violence and decadence defined the Christian faith rather than opposed it. We put on robes, built cathedrals, accumulated wealth and power, then lost our barbarian way.

We find Judaism in the same tragic condition during the days of Jesus. Really it's an incredibly strange scenario to watch. Given that Jesus Himself is the God of Israel, it should strike us as extraordinary that He was not welcome there. But then again, Jesus didn't like it there. One of Jesus' most violent moments took place in the temple. He became disgusted

by what He saw. He was so incensed by how Judaism had become a religious retail business that He began to destroy all of the sellers' merchandise.

It's important to point out that Jesus was not against business. His anger wasn't a response to people selling something of value or providing a meaningful service. His anger was evoked because the sellers of goods had made access to God a business. They had made forgiveness something you could purchase. They had made the guilt and shame of others the marketplace for their profit. They had made the house of God into a den of robbers and thieves. They had become so good at religion that they had no need for God. They were so full of themselves that they had no room for God. When it came down to it, they loved their civilized religion far more than they longed to know the God who created them. They treasured the civilization built around their religion and despised the primal faith from which it was born. They would rather have the temple than the Presence.

So Jesus let them have it, which begs the question: What good is a house of God if God no longer chooses to live there? Speaking of His own body, Jesus challenged them to destroy

the temple, and God would raise it up after three days. They thought He meant the work of art built by the hands of men. They could not for a moment imagine that God would choose so barbaric a container as flesh and blood. It shouldn't surprise us that soon after they destroyed the Temple of God, God destroyed their temple.

There may be no clearer place where we see the division between the civilized and the barbarian. We discover the painful reality that even God's people, when we become civilized, are more than willing to crucify God. When we choose a civilized faith, God becomes, at the very least, an irritant and, at worst, an enemy to our faith. We find in Jesus that the hostility of God turns toward empty religion and the mercy of God turns toward the outcast and sinner. The way that Jesus called the masses to choose was far too barbaric for those who held the positions of religious leadership. The claim that He must become the sacrificial Lamb who would take away the sins of the world was an insult to their sense of piety and self-righteousness.

But maybe the most insulting thing that Jesus said or did was to become the friend of sinners. He focused His ministry on women and men who were despised by those in spiritual

authority. The path God chose for Himself was far too common for their sensibility. They couldn't imagine that God would choose that kind of life for Himself. God would be above such things. God was far too civilized to choose such barbarism.

Luke described this conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of His time as he followed the conversion of Levi:

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:27-32)



## LOVE UNTAMED

Two thousand years ago God started a revolt against the religion He started. So don't ever put it past God to cause a groundswell movement against churches and Christian institutions that bear His name. If He was willing to turn Judaism upside down, don't think for a moment our institutions are safe from a divine revolt. I am convinced that even now there are multitudes of followers of Jesus Christ who are sick and tired of the church playing games and playing down the call of God. My travels only confirm that the murmurings of revolution are everywhere. I am convinced that there is an uprising in the works and that no one less than God is behind it.

Anyone who can picture Jesus as the great Advocate of tradition is doing some serious doctoring of biblical history. Jesus was anything but the poster child for status quo. With a band of brothers and a small community of others, Jesus instigated an uprising that He expected to reach the very ends of the earth. You must never forget that it was only to a handful of individuals that Jesus entrusted an outcome that would make disciples of all the nations of the earth. The uprising was



to transcend culture, ethnicity, race, religion, status—every and any divide established by men.

The driving purpose of this barbarian revolt is to liberate every person who longs to find freedom in God. Like barbarians destroying civilization, they are to remove every nonessential obstacle between God and man. Let no one remain captive to the nefarious schemes of religionists who attempt to hold God for ransom. Let nothing prevent you or hinder you from providing mercy and forgiveness to those living under the burden of guilt and shame. Who could have guessed that a message of love could incite so much hostility?

Barbarians are entrusted with the gospel—not a message of judgment and condemnation, but good news from God to humanity. Yet the opposition and persecution came with a force that could not be expected or even imagined. Ironically Jesus was crucified not in spite of His love, but because of it. Somehow love incites both love and hate with equal force. The mission of Christ would be so easy to embrace and carry out if love always resulted in love, but it does not. It seems the world insists that love be proved. So then those who claim love are required to endure hate's most brutal tests.

Wherever the love of Christ would be spread by His disciples, they encountered rejection, persecution, suffering, and even death.

Anyone who chooses the barbarian way will learn quickly that love and sacrifice cannot be separated. This is perhaps why so many of us who know love fear love. We know that love is not the absence of pain. If anything, love is the promise of pain. No one has loved more deeply than God. Has anyone ever been more betrayed? God would not know suffering if He did not know love. But because He is Love, He chose to suffer on our behalf. Without love there is no glory in suffering.

The suffering of Christ glorifies God because it elevates love. Compelled by love, God would go where He knew suffering was certain. Love always moves to sacrifice, which is exactly where He calls us to go. We shouldn't be surprised, then, that to follow Christ is to abandon the luxury of safety and security. If we are to be like Him, we must always risk for love. We are invited to follow Him with reckless abandon. The call of God is more than a leap of faith; it is a life of faith. Even when it seems beyond our abilities, we should not be surprised when God tells us to jump.

## JUMP SCHOOL

For several years we rented a two-story house in Los Angeles. Both my kids had spent a good part of their childhood enjoying that home. A unique feature of the house was that a small window from the second-story bathroom opened a path to the roof. I always figured there would be a day when one of my kids would climb up on the sink and work his or her way out on the ledge. It just seemed to be one of those things that I or my brother, Alex, would have done when we were kids.

Early one evening Kim and I were in the front yard when all of a sudden, we heard a little voice calling for us from the roof. As soon as Kim saw him, her nurturing instinct kicked in, and she started commanding him to get back inside. I have to admit I was kind of proud of him right then, but what he did next totally surprised me.

Looking past his mom, he asked me if he could jump. When Aaron shouted, "Dad, can I jump?" Kim answered on my behalf, "No, you can't jump. Get back inside."

As if he hadn't heard anything at all, he asked me again, "Dad, can I jump?"

Now I know what I was supposed to do. A dad is never

supposed to override the mom (I'm working on it). I'm just telling you what really happened. After all, he did ask me. I answered, "Yeah, go ahead."

He said, "Really?"

I said, "Yeah, sure. Go ahead and jump."

Kim looked at me as if I was out of my mind and asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

In a sort of explanation I asked Aaron, "Aaron, are you going to jump sometime?"

He said, "Yeah, I think so."

I said, "Okay. I'd rather have you jump now so if you jump and break your legs, we can take you to the hospital." It made perfect sense to me.

He responded, "Dad, do you think I'll make it?"

I said, "Oh, yeah, you'll make it." If I knew one thing for certain, it was that he would reach the ground. I just wasn't sure in what condition.

He said, "Okay. I'm going to jump."

I had one suggestion before he took off. I said, "Hey, buddy, try to clear the concrete and land on the grass. It's softer."

He thought that was a good idea, stepped as far back as

he could on the roof, and began running to jump. Just before his first step he yelled, "Dad, catch me," and I said, "I'll try."

And he jumped.

I almost caught him. It was so close. He just slipped right through my hands. I think I did slow his fall a little bit. In either case, he's recovered well since then. I'm just kidding. He was fine. (Don't try this at home.)

## WILDFIRE

I know it's very unlikely that you will ever invite me to speak at a parenting conference, but hang with me for a moment. From the parenting end, I've seen far too many kids raised in Christian homes who are indifferent to Christ and often carry a great disdain for the church. Sometimes it's the result of blatant hypocrisy, but other times it's the result of nothing less than sheer monotony and boredom. We raise our children in the cocoon of a domesticated faith and wonder why they run as far as they can to find adventure.

A long time ago I decided I would never let that happen to my children. I'm a first-generation Christian, but over the years I have seen the dangers that come with being the children

of the second generation and beyond. First-generation believers, even when they are barbarians, often make the mistake of raising their children to be civilized.

Paul addressed that point in a letter to Timothy:

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. (2 Timothy 1:5–9)

Several times Paul encouraged Timothy to be identified with Christ and to not be ashamed of doing that. Connected to his encouragement, he called Timothy to not shrink back

because of the suffering that he might face. If you read his letter carefully, it is the pleading of a barbarian who is losing his son in the faith to the way of the civilized. Paul called Timothy to reignite the fire that lay dormant within him. Paul was persuaded that Timothy had a genuine faith, but he was also equally convinced that the life Timothy was living did not reflect one who was alive in the Spirit. Timothy's problem wasn't blatant sin, but latent faith. Paul was calling Timothy to choose the barbarian way out of civilization.

Just yesterday a husband and wife told me that they raised their first son to be a gentleman, and now as a man he does not walk with Christ. They went on to say, "We have a second son, and we're going to raise him as a barbarian." They understood firsthand the painful difference between a civilized Christian and the barbarian way of Jesus.

How many stories do we need of children who grow up in church being forced to act like Christians rather than being won to the heart of God? Both are an effort to shape the character of our children. The first is an external force; the latter an internal force. The civilized Christian does what is right out of fear; the barbarian does what is right out of love. The



Christian civilization is held together by rules and rituals; the barbarian revolt is fueled by the passion of God and guided by the mission of God. If our children are going to walk away from Christ, we need to raise them in such a way that they understand that to walk away from Jesus is to walk away from a life of faith, risk, and adventure and to choose a life that is boring, mundane, and ordinary.

For Aaron, the jump was fraught with danger. From my vantage point, I could see, though the jump was terrifying, he would find himself triumphant. It was important that he jumped and perhaps even more important that he knew me as the kind of father who would always call him to greater endeavors rather than send him back to the safe place.

### STAND ALONE

I think God is like that. For too long we've been telling followers of Jesus Christ to climb back through the window. Our message is that "God wants to keep you safe." We can't even see the importance of growing the courage to jump. But what if our house was on fire? What if Aaron's only memory was my telling him that he couldn't do it? What if I had, in that

moment, nurtured fear and apprehension? Would he become the kind of person who would die out of fear of trying? What if the courage to jump or the lack of it would be the difference in saving someone else's life?

It may seem counterintuitive, but the more civilized we seem to become, the more detached from the pain of others we end up finding ourselves. The most civilized churches have really no practical concern for people outside their congregations. The brokenness of a lost and unbelieving world is not enough to inspire the painful changes necessary to make the church relevant to the world in which we live.

One of the tragedies of a civilized society is that no one wants to get involved. What becomes appropriate is to mind our own business. When we join a community that lacks a passionate heart for the world, we soon find ourselves acquiescing to apathy. It is a painful tragedy to see a brand-new follower of Christ alive with a barbarian spirit soon conformed to the status quo.

History again and again reveals to us that we are less likely to do good when we perceive ourselves a part of a larger crowd than if we make the choice standing alone. When we are in a crowd, we are more prone toward acts of evil or at

least compliance to evil. For some reason the civilized can rationalize apathy and feel themselves absolved from personal responsibility. Good needs to be done, but someone else will take care of it.

The barbarian revolt tolerates no such abdication of responsibility. Every citizen of the kingdom of God is brought into the heat of the conflict between good and evil. Everyone who swears allegiance to Christ bears responsibility for humanity. The power and force of the barbarian way are that each one who chooses His path must find the courage to jump.

I wanted my son to have the courage to jump when needed. I am convinced God wants the same thing for us. Is it possible that your Father is also calling you to jump or at least encouraging you to do so? It is the Spirit of God stirring within you, pleading with you to stop settling for the status quo.

### BEHIND ENEMY LINES

The way that we've applied the wrong metaphors in the wrong places is at least partially responsible for our inclination

toward domesticating new believers. The Scriptures talk in terms of a new follower of Christ having undergone a new birth. The central passage for this image is John 3. Jesus was having a conversation with Nicodemus and said to him, "I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he's born again."

Nicodemus immediately concluded that Jesus was calling him to reenter his mother's womb a second time. Instead of backing off, Jesus pressed harder: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:3-8).

This, of course, leads us to perceive people who are new in the faith as nothing more than brand-new babes. They're innocent and helpless and incapable of caring for themselves, much less serving others. Yet the phrase that Jesus used can also be translated not as "born again," but as "born from above." Jesus connected this birth not with a mother's womb,

but with the Spirit of God descending from heaven and moving with power.

My point is this: the metaphor of new birth has led us to some wrong conclusions. When we are born of flesh and blood, we are helpless and dependent on others even for our own survival. That is not the case when we are born of Spirit. John spoke of the first birth as one of water and the second birth as one of Spirit. Strangely enough John the Baptist made a similar distinction in Luke 3:16 when he declared, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

When we are born again, we are dropped not into a maternity ward, but into a war zone. Our birthplace is less mother's womb and more battlefield earth. Maybe the first word we hear should not be "welcome," but "jump." There is no trial run, no practice life.

### KNIGHTS IN DARKNESS

When you enter the kingdom of God, there is no safe zone or waiting room. There really isn't even a boot camp. It's on-

the-job, on-the-field training. You get to take your first steps of new life in the middle of the battlefield. The Scriptures are quite clear about this. You are in the middle of a war. Yet the war is not against flesh and blood; the war is not against people.

Paul said it this way: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

The barbarian revolt is an insurrection that defies the treaty between civilization and the powers of the dark world. We will not stand by and watch humanity sell its soul to gain the world. We will not be seduced by the comforts offered us if only we would compromise. We cannot pretend that all there is, is what we can see. Barbarians know the world of spirit. We know there is a darkness that subversively corrupts the hearts of men, and to do nothing is to be complicit. We are born into a war. We may feel like children, but we are warriors.

Paul wanted to ensure that we know the nature of this conflict. He wrote, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with

are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Paul reminded us that not only are we dropped into the middle of a war, but the war rages in the middle of us. You cannot run or hide from the war any more than you can run or hide from yourself. You can become a prisoner of war, but you are never exempt from the war.

It is true that the enemy will essentially leave you alone if you are domesticated. He will not waste his energy destroying a civilized religion. If anything, he uses his energy to promote such activity. Religion can be one of the surest places to keep us from God. When our faith becomes refined, it is no longer dangerous to the dark kingdom.

Barbarians, on the other hand, are not to be trusted. They respect no borders that are established by powers or principalities. They have but one King, one Lord, and one mission. They are insolent enough to crash the gates of hell. For the sake of others, they are willing to risk their own lives and thrust themselves into the midst of peril.