

The Crags or the Cages

by Vance Havner

The sermon emphasizes the importance of freedom, the call to be a prophet, and the need for revival in the church.

Duration: 26:30

Scripture: Psalm 23:1, Proverbs 29:18, Isaiah 40:3, Acts 16:10, Romans 10:14, Hebrews 13:5

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the danger of becoming complacent and comfortable in our spiritual lives. He compares this complacency to a bird staying in a sanctuary instead of flying freely. The preacher suggests that many churches today are in a sad state because of pulpits without freedom and preachers who do not preach the full truth. He also references the story of Samson and the apostle Paul to illustrate the consequences of being bound and blinded in our spiritual journey. The sermon encourages listeners to strive for higher spiritual ground and not settle for the comforts of this world.

Transcript

I am thinking about two precious references. The psalmist says in the 103rd Psalm, verse 5, that God renews our strength like the eagles. And then you have preached, I'm sure, from the other familiar eagle reference.

One of them, there are many. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles.

Spurgeon said, I'd rather be a lean bird in the woods than a fat bird in a cage. A caged eagle beating his bar, his wings against prison bars is a sad sight. But sadder still is the fat old eagle who has given up dreaming about mountain crags and has resigned himself to captivity.

Eagles were never meant for an imprisoned life. They belong to the heights and to the wild freedom of lonely peaks and solitary outlooks. There's no better symbol of liberty than the lone eagle.

And it is fitting that this lordly bird should be the emblem of America, the land of the free and the home of the brave. But if moral corruption continues like it's going in this country now, we may have to change the emblem, swap the eagle for a vulture, some think maybe for a chicken. America is no longer a solitary eagle on a lonely peak.

She's becoming a fat old bird in a gilded cage. And we're not beating our wings in protest against the bars, longing for the heights where we once soared. We're dying in sinful and smug ease.

Not too long ago we were a band of pioneers that braved countless dangers and crossed 3,000 miles of ocean and then later on 3,000 more miles of wilderness to make America a young giant among the nations admired by all the world. Rugged spirits flocked here from every land, and it's still the most favored spot on earth. I like it.

I like it yet. And these folks that don't like it, I'd be glad to stand in New York Harbor and see them leave in a boat for the land of their heart's desire and wave after them just as long as I can see them. But we are fast losing our freedom so dearly bought.

No outside power could put us in fetters. But we're forging bonds of imprisonment and moral bondage and spiritual enslavement, government control, and the incarceration of the welfare state. The fathers of 1776 risked security to win liberty, and we're selling liberty to win security and be fat birds in a cage instead of lean birds in the woods.

We sell our birthright for a mess of pottage and we're piling up possessions without and becoming paupers within. Our forefathers didn't look to Washington for a handout. They had inner resources.

There are worse things than poverty if we could abolish it, which we can't anyhow. But if we could put two cars in every garage and a color TV in every room and a boat in everybody's backyard, we'd still be a nation of spiritual beggars. If our souls don't keep up with our science, what shall we profit if we gain the world and lose our own souls? We've conquered the wilderness and now we're invading space, but the greatest of frontiers is the world of the spirit, and that's virgin territory with too many people.

And we're not oversupplied with pioneers in that realm. God helped the American eagle to get out of his cage and back on the crags and out of the prison and up to the peaks. And Christianity needs to do the same thing.

It needs to get out of its cages and back to the crags. Our Lord came to set us free and we need to stand fast in that liberty and not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage. The average church member's a prisoner today behind bars of habit and bars of fear and doubt and sin.

We need to wait on the Lord and mount up with wings as eagles. We were meant to be a different breed on this earth, exiles and aliens, pilgrims and strangers, birds of another feather. We're on migration, beloved.

We're not supposed to settle here. I've read of a wild duck crossing over with his companions and he came down in a barnyard and the food was good and he liked it. And he stayed a day and stayed a week and stayed a month.

Then one day he was feeding out there and he recognized a familiar sound up in the air. His erstwhile companions were crossing over again. And there was a momentary impulse to rise up and join them, but he said, oh, why bother? I like it here.

The feed's good. Let them go. The day came when he no longer even heard them when they crossed over.

The last time that duck went swimming was in his own gravy. Oh, I've known Christians. I've known Christians that once mounted up on eagles' wings and then they settled in the barnyard of this world.

I've known preachers who did it. And for a while they were still sensitive to the voice of God. Once in a while in a good old meeting when the preacher preached and the saints sang about higher ground, his eyes filled with tears and his heart felt a momentary impulse to rise to better things.

But the longer he lived in the barnyard, the less response there was to heaven. And finally he was content to live where doubts arise and fears dismay. I hope I don't speak to somebody this morning who's getting too comfortable in the barnyard at this age.

My friend, if you feather your nest too well, you won't fly. You remember that other eagle passage over in Deuteronomy? As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh him, beareth him on her wings. So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange God with him.

I'm sure those baby eagles may have complained when they were pushed out of the nest to learn to fly. Don't bother us. Comfortable, yeah, don't disturb us.

But eaglets don't learn to fly that way. Sometimes God has to destroy our nest and break the family circle and send sickness and defeat and disaster to throw us out on the wings of faith. If he didn't, your nest would become a cage, and you were meant for the crags.

And the church needs to have her nest torn up these days. The early church in Jerusalem became an ingrown, sort of a closed corporation, and God had to tear up the nest with persecution, and they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. I've seen some fancy church nests that cost several million dollars.

The congregation meets on Sunday, but they don't scatter out in witnessing all week. As the early church did, they feathered their nest, and they're resting too well, an assault and sheltered Christianity. Afraid to be lean and lone and unwilling to face the storms and brave the heights, we'll end up fat and foul in the cages of conformity.

God grant us a stirring revival that'll tear up the nest of our complacency and open the doors of our cages, send us up to the crags of high and holy living. Some people don't want their nest stirred up. I've been in churches that didn't want the nest stirred up.

How well I know it after all these years. Somebody has said Christianity began as a company of lay witnesses. It has become a professional pulpitism financed by lay spectators.

I've been in many an aggregation like that. That nest needs to be torn up with enough evil that sends Christians all on wings of faith to breathe the mountain air of victorious living instead of smothering in the cages of conformity. That's the way it started.

God grant that the youth of the church may be renewed as eagles, but churches will not rise any higher than the preachers, and preachers must choose whether to be a prophet on a crag or a priest in a cage. Old Gypsy Smith said, I was born in a field, don't put me in a flower pot. The trend in the ministry today is from the crags down to cages.

The prophets of old were lean birds in the woods. They were thrown into cages, yes. Our fathers chained in prisons dark were still in heart and conscience free.

Paul was in Nero's prison, but thank God he wasn't Nero's prisoner. He said, I'm the prisoner of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist and Paul and John Bunyan were caged eagles, but stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.

Amos at Bethel was a lone eagle. Oh, Dr. Amaziah was a fat bird in a cage. Oh, Michael was a lean bird.

I know they fed him on bread and water and those 400 fat birds that said, go up to Ramoth, Gilead, and Prosper. They were all in a cage and didn't know it. Martin Luther was a free bird in the woods, but Erasmus was a caged eagle.

An eagle's safer in a zoo, but eagles are not made for zoos. Somebody said a ship is safer in a harbor, but ships are made for the stormy sea. And many a young seminary graduate has decided that it's safer to be a priest than a prophet.

You see, priests retire, but prophets never, never. Preachers who have moved this world have never sold their liberty for a comfortable cage in some ecclesiastical menagerie. Better be a free preacher who can walk into a pulpit responsible only to God than to be somebody's ventriloquist dunny.

Paul was a lone eagle at large. He tried out his wings in the desert of Arabia. He wasn't a captive in anybody's zoo.

And when old Amos went up to Bethel, he hadn't submitted his manuscript to some office for some little fellow in a swivel chair to go through it with a red pencil to make sure it wouldn't offend anybody. All who follow in his train are despised by all religious zoo keepers who hate free eagles on the wing. When Bernard of Cluny wrote his scathing denunciation of the evils of his time, when old Savonarola blasted the sins of Florence, when Wesley preached outdoors, when Spurgeon rebuked the fellowship of the Baptists, even in his day in a downgrade controversy, they were lone eagles.

The mountain air of their areas was too breezy for some of their caged contemporaries. Wrong theological training can put an eagle in a cage. Boram, the Australian essayist, tells about going to hear a young preacher.

He said the first time I heard him, I couldn't exactly figure what was the trouble. He'd been to school one year, didn't sound like he once did. I'd known him when he was a flame of fire in the pulpit.

Then went back next year and the work had been done. And all I could think of was a lion in curl papers. That's about the same thing as an eagle with its wings clipped.

I think of a preacher that preached in some of our greatest churches some years ago, he was on his way up to the crags. But then he changed his mind and got into a cage, hoping to be an actor. And they buried him under such sad circumstances.

It ought to be a warning to every preacher. And another friend of mine up in Providence, Rhode Island, told me about a great preacher of a generation ago. I heard him preach.

There was a time when he shook the rafters. He said there was a time when he was my greatest inspiration, but there came a time when he was my greatest warning. God help us.

My preacher brother, don't you ever get caught in a cage on your way to the crag. A.C. Dixon was one of the greatest preachers the South ever turned out. He used to preach in Cleveland County, the churches where his old daddy, Tommy Dixon, used to be pastor.

A.C. went to Spurgeon's church. He said every preacher is or ought to be a prophet of God who preaches as God bids him without regard for his oaths. When he becomes conscious of the fact that he's a leader in his church or denomination, he's reached a crisis in his ministry.

Will he be a prophet of God or a leader of men? If he decides only to be a prophet in as far as he can without losing his leadership, he becomes a diplomat and ceases to be a prophet at all. If he decides to maintain his leadership at all costs, he may easily become a politician who pulls the wires in order to gain or hold a position. He who would prophesy or speak forth the message of God is careful of none of these things, but only that he should speak the message that God gives him, even though he be an unwholesome minority.

There are several ways of silencing a prophet. You can silence him by persecution like they did old John the Baptist when they cut off his head, but promotion will do it. I've known some prophets who were going great, then they got promoted and have never been heard from since.

Some say, well, I've changed my convictions because the climate has changed. Friend, you don't change your convictions with the climate. They ought to be governed by conscience, enlightened by the scripture and the Holy Spirit.

I was in a bird sanctuary down in Florida some years ago, a wonderful place, and I saw some birds here. It wasn't a cage. There wasn't any cage open, and they could have flown out.

And I said, how come? How come these ducks are staying here? They could leave. He said, it's too comfortable here. They quit flying.

I think I've seen some preachers like that in my time. I'm convinced that the sad state of many a church today is due in great measure to pulpits without freedom, personal sins, fear of man. Thank you, Dr. Bennett, for calling our attention to that again.

I tell you, a preacher who doesn't preach all the truth that God has spoken to his heart is going to wind up in the cage. Samson's last chapter is a sad story of binding and blinding and grinding. And many a preacher spends his days in bondage, blinded, and he becomes, if not a blind leader of the blind, at least a bland leader of the bland.

And that may be just as bad. And one reason for his shackles is that he doesn't spend enough time with God. Elijah and Amos and John the Baptist and our Lord himself were identified with the desert and the wilderness and the mountainside.

Elijah could stand up before Ahab because he had first stood before God, and Ahab was small potatoes after that. He was a man of light passions, but he prayed and our Lord rose a great while before it was day and went to a solitary place and there prayed. The best way to avoid the cage is to find the crag.

I'm not talking about a mere vacation. I'm not talking about study. I'm not talking about recreation alone, not even prayer alone.

I'm talking about reflection with the Lord far from the maddened crowds of ignoble strife. Last summer I'd planned a trip to Europe and the Holy Land, a change, and took a cottage up at Montreux and spent some time there. My wife and I and I climbed every morning to a peak.

It was a hard climb up there. And I thought about Billy Graham's home a little further up and went up there and I thought, how wise a prophet to build a home in such a spot. A poor fed eagle needs an area, and God meant that these preachers should be eagles.

He didn't mean for you to be a parrot. We're too much with people today. Right now the major emphasis in the Church is on social involvement and preachers are being told that their main business is to equip, according to Ephesians, the layman for their ministry.

Well, I believe in that. But if that's all you do, if equipping were your only ministry, that would leave John the Baptist out of it, and there wouldn't be any place for a watchman on the wall and a voice in the wilderness. My Bible says, how shall they hear without a preacher? It doesn't say, how shall they hear without a brass band? If we all get lost in the crowd and there's no prophet with a word from the Lord, we shall discover that where there's no vision, the people pray.

Visions don't come in committee meetings. I don't think anybody ever had a vision in a committee meeting. They don't come in discussion groups.

They come when men like Habakkuk say, I'll get up in my watchtower and see what God has to say. Acts 16.10 says, after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go. Now you see, if one man leads the craft, that's you, preacher.

We can mean the membership. It can mean any number. God gives a vision to one man and the implementation of it to many men.

The ministry of the word and prayer, that's your business. Let others serve the other table. Oh, you say, but you preachers want to live in an ivory tower.

I don't believe in an ivory tower, but old Habakkuk got up in a tower and you can see more territory from a tower. You can't see the forest for the trees sometimes if you get out too close in the midst of the mixture. The prophet sees the whole picture like an eagle from a mountain crag.

I tell you, Daniel wasn't just one of them when he turned down that rich food on Nebuchadnezzar's table. And when he continued his devotions as usual, though it meant a lion's den, when he stood at Belshazzar's feast and read the handwriting on the wall, he didn't belong to the soothsayers and the smooth sayers. He was a lean bird in the woods, not a fat bird in the cage.

And if you're a caged eagle, find a crag somewhere and stay there. You can come back to your pulpit like old John McNeill. Is it a bad habit? Are you the slave of your congregation? Have you got your church on your neck instead of on your heart? Is it timidity in the fear of man? Is it uncertainty, lack of conviction, lack of authority? Is it even a hobby? You know, your hobby can become a hobble.

Get back to the crags and don't be afraid of loneliness. Eagles don't fly in flocks. There are birds that do, and I'll not name some of them, but eagles don't fly in flocks.

I climbed that peak at Montreat last summer every morning. And two years ago when I was up in Virginia, I got up early of the morning because I found my way up and up and up to where I could look over all that glorious mountain country. And I thought about that old proverb, the difference is worth the distance.

You know, but I stopped halfway and I missed the view. And I found that out at Montreat. The high soul takes the high road, the low soul takes the low.

And in between on the dusty flats the rest drift to and fro. I thank God for Dr. Bennett, what he's been saying. You know, I tell you one reason why he's in the biggest church in Arkansas.

I'm not merely talking about going on to a big church, but I was with that man in Memphis, and I was with him in Fort Smith, and God willing I'm going back this fall. He came down every day to eat with me at the motel, and he wanted to talk about the things of God. And I said to myself, he's going somewhere.

He's on his way up. And I don't mean in the worldly sense of success, there's nothing wrong with that under God. But I said he's headed for a crag.

Some preachers take the low road and end in disgrace, and others just take the plateau because it's not rough climbing. But here and there a few, thank God, make up their minds to reach higher ground. The air's fresher up there, brothers, and the view's better up there.

And there may not be as many up there, but it's mighty good company what is up there. For you'll be ridiculed by everybody that lives down in the valley, but the difference is worth the distance. I want to bear testimony in this, my last opportunity at this conference, to the fact that God has kept his promise to me.

He said, if you delight yourself in the Lord, I'll give you the desires of your heart. I believe that. I started out in old Catawba County, and I used to walk along that old road on top of the hill, look across the old Grandfather Mountain and Table Rock and the Blue Ridge like sentinels along the skyline, and I said, Lord, I want to be a traveling preacher and I want to write books.

I don't know how to do either one. You've given me that desire. I think it's all right.

Pastor from Hickory First Church is here now. I was over there not long ago. First time I tried to talk away from home back in 1913.

Pretty good while. I remember going over there in one of those old Fords with a bulb horn, 30 horsepower and 20 of them dead. I got over there, stood up in a chair, and Dr. Bradshaw stood on one side and J.G. Hart, the pastor of the church, stood on the other, and my old daddy was back there praying for me.

He stayed back there and prayed, and I got up and preached and did the best I could, and I've been trying to do that ever since. That's all God ever asked of anybody, just to be faithful and do the best he could. Said he'd make a way for me, and he has.

I'll never leave thee nor forsake thee. I think about that old lady that the young preacher just out of seminary was saying, Sister, you know that verse could really be translated, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake you. Oh, she said, the Lord may have to say that three times for you Greek scholars, but once is enough for me.

Oh, I tell you, my old daddy used to go with me when I was a little boy on these preaching trips. I met a man here yesterday who heard me, and I was 12 years old, around Shelby somewhere, and then the day

came when I could go by myself, and Father would meet me at Newton. They've still got that little old station.

They've got a new one there, but every time the train goes by, a fancy I can see Father standing out there beside that little old Ford Roadster in that old blue serge suit that never had been pressed since the day he bought it, and I'd come up to him, and he'd always ask me one question. How did you get along? It's been a long time. One of these days I'm going to round the last curve, and when I get into glory, I think he'll be there in the robes of glory, and I believe the very first thing he'll ask will be, how did you get along? I'm going to say, bless God, all right, all right.

Oh, I feel like that little girl that tried to recite the 23rd Psalm. She couldn't get any further than this. The Lord's my shepherd.

That's all I want. That's all anybody ever says. So I ask you preachers this morning, the rest of you don't get caught in a cage on your way up to the cross.

I heard of an afternoon one came back, and he had a little sprig of pine in his hand. He said he couldn't get any further. I got as far as the pines.

Later in the afternoon, the second warrior came back, and he had a sprig of fir in his hand from the fir tree. He said, I almost made it, but I gave out. I dared not try any further.

This is all I bring back. Late in the afternoon, the last one came in. He didn't have a thing.

The chief said, what do you mean bringing nothing back? Well, he said, you told us that if we made it to the top, we'd see the shining sea beyond. He said, I didn't bring anything back, but I saw the sea. My friend, when old Paul came down to the end of his journey, he didn't have much to show for it so far as this world's concerned.

He didn't have any stocks and bonds. Oh yes, he did. He had stocks for his feet and bonds for his wrists.

He said, bring out all overcoat in those few books. He made it to the top, and the difference is worth the distance. A preacher may end his course with nothing in his hand, no fame, no money, no honors of earth, but you're a success, friend, if you've scaled the utmost high and caught a gleam of glory bright.

It's a rough road, but the difference is worth the distance. Don't you ever get caught in a cage on your way to the cross.

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