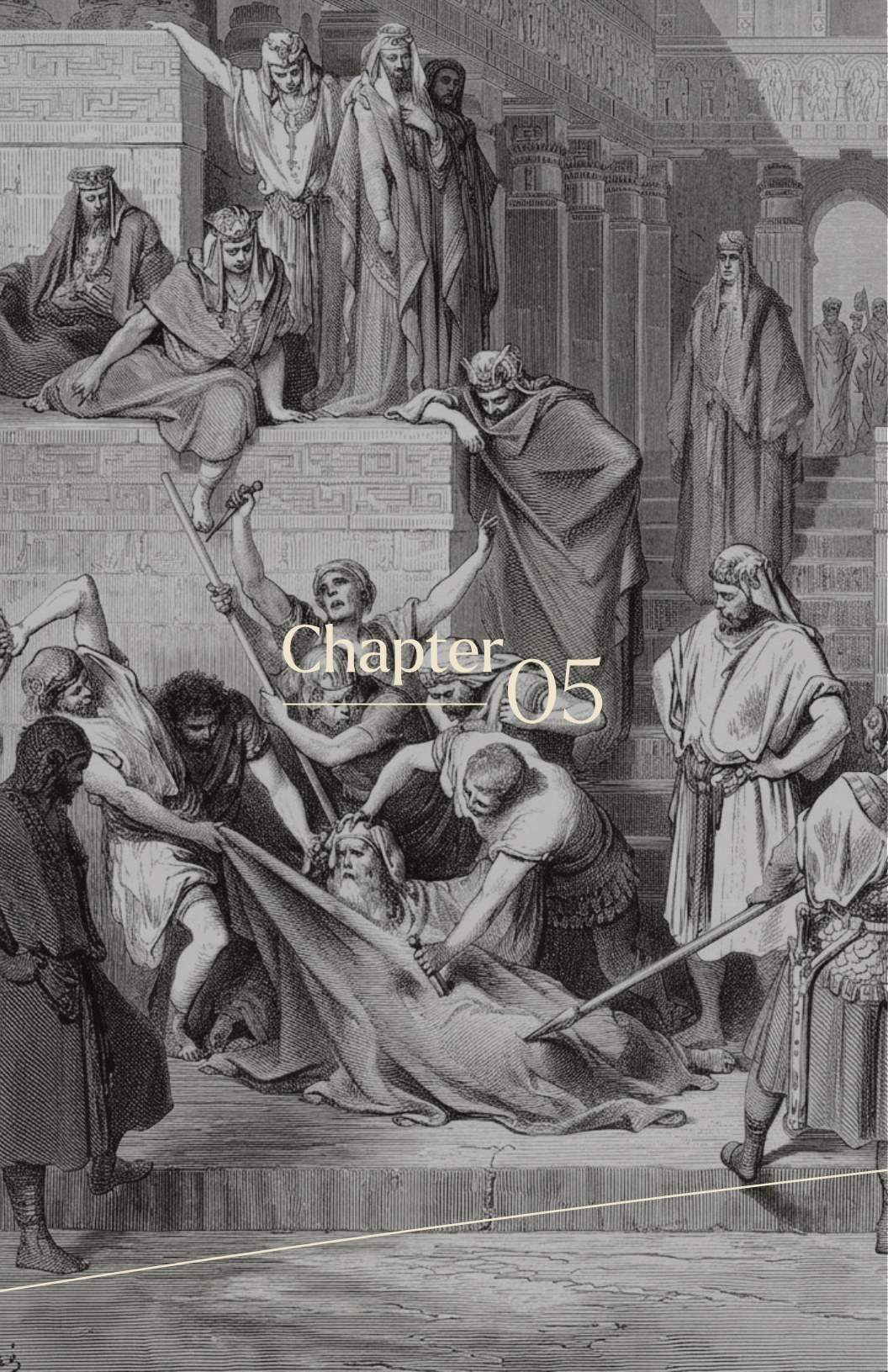




Chapter 05

Eleazar & Fortitude

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UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Eleazar had enjoyed a long life, revered by his community for his impeccable character and wisdom. But, in his old age, everything changed and Eleazar had to make a choice: deny God, appease the government, and live; or stay faithful to God and suffer the consequences.

As he decided what to do, he considered how he had lived, how he wanted to die, and the kind of legacy he would leave behind. What would you decide if you were in his shoes? What do you hope people say about you when you die? What do you want your life to teach those who come after you?

Most of us want our lives to tell a story of greatness. We long to leave a legacy of hard work, honesty, faithfulness to the people we loved, and success in our endeavors. Accomplishing such a legacy requires fortitude, the virtue that enables us to act courageously, endure suffering, overcome hardships, and stay faithful to God despite the difficulties.

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Our current culture, however, doesn't always push us toward the virtue of fortitude. Instead, we are often enticed to fearfully shy away from the difficulty, suffering, or sacrifice that faithfulness to others and to God sometimes requires: playing your best in the game when you're losing by a lot; asking someone out on a date when you're not sure they will say yes; remaining lovingly patient when your toddler is melting down or your teenager is having an emotional outburst; having a crucial conversation with a coworker or family member that you fear might not be received well; persevering through a challenging project that suddenly got even harder; or showing up for others when we're experiencing our own pain and sorrow. Fortitude gives us the inner strength to give our best to God and others amid the various trials and sorrows we experience in ordinary daily life.

Eleazar's extraordinary example of fortitude inspires us to live this virtue in our ordinary daily lives. Over decades of small acts of courage and perseverance in his daily life with his family, friends, and community, Eleazar had mastered the virtue of fortitude, which gave him the character to perform the bigger act of courage at the end of his life and leave a legacy of wisdom and honor.

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Through Eleazar's story, we will see fortitude exemplified in two ways: in a dramatic decision to stay faithful to God no matter the consequences and in the daily decisions that make us the kind of people who are capable of such great acts. Let's dive in and learn from his example.

Eleazar

Eleazar spent his youth freely worshipping God and teaching the Jewish law in the temple. But when a domineering tyrant rises to power, he attempts to eliminate Judaism altogether. Now, government personnel, well acquainted with this respected teacher, are trying to force him to eat pork. Although eating pork may seem inconsequential to those who do not follow the Jewish faith, for a man like Eleazar, this would have been equivalent to denying God altogether. He knew well that eating such food went against God's laws. This was more than a mere matter of dietary protocol; it was a sign of faithfulness to God Himself.

Therefore, when the authorities try to coerce Eleazar to eat pork, he spits out the forbidden food and voluntarily goes to the torture rack, "welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution" (2 Mac 6:19). The officials, motivated by their old acquaintance with Eleazar, implore him to bring his own meat and pretend it is pork. He then will appear to appease the king while technically

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fulfilling the law. Eleazar, however, is unrelenting. He instead acts with courage, claiming that such a trick would mislead the many young people who look up to him and would bring disgrace upon him in his old age. He boldly declares,

For even if for the present I should avoid the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws (2 Mac 6:26-28).

As a result, the officials conclude that Eleazar has gone mad. From their point of view, only insanity could drive a man to willingly lay down his life for something so seemingly small. Their kindness turns to hostility, and they send Eleazar to be tortured and killed. Although he suffers terribly, in the last seconds of his life, he utters his last words, "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him" (2 Mac 6:30).

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The awe-inspiring narrative of Eleazar's martyrdom is a deeply loved example of courage and virtue for both Jews and Christians. At the end of his life, he was able to perform a great act of fortitude because all his life he had given himself to small ones, for he lived an "excellent life even from childhood" (2 Mac 6:23). It's no different for us. Becoming a person of courage does not happen in a single heroic moment, but through a lifetime of deliberate, faithful decisions. Let us explore the virtue of fortitude and discover how we can live this virtue well.

Fortitude

Most of us can admire Eleazar's heroic resolve, but if we are honest, we wonder if we would be capable of doing the same. How then can we become people of fortitude, regardless of circumstances? To find the answer, let's explore this virtue in greater detail.

"Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life" (CCC1808). Like all virtues, practicing fortitude grounds us between two extremes—what St. Thomas Aquinas called vices of excess and vices of defect.

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The first extreme is cowardice, a defect through which we shrink away from pursuing the good when we encounter difficulty, pain, or danger. Fear or a desire for an easier path forward takes over, and we act with timidity, seeking safety or comfort instead of committing ourselves to doing what is right.

The second extreme is recklessness, an excess that leads us to chase after thrills or take senseless risks in the name of bravery. When we divorce bravery from reason and act brashly, we rush into danger and can bring unnecessary harm to ourselves and others.

While the coward is weak and the reckless man is unwise, the man of fortitude perseveres in doing what is good, no matter the challenges, sufferings or sorrows. Avoiding dis-couragement, he fulfills his responsibility and persists in the love of God and neighbor.

No matter our intentions to love and obey God, our earthly home is a valley of tears full of suffering, tragedy, and injustice. How do we respond when we feel left out of a group of friends, are insecure about our looks or our performance, or when our self-worth is attacked by other people's criticism? Or what about when things don't go our way—our car breaks down, our roommate frustrates us, or when we don't get a promotion? Or how about

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when we are sad because of a broken relationship, sickness, or our spouse has hurt us? Do we give up, settle for finding comfort in lesser things, or draw back in self-protection? Or do we courageously resolve to overcome these temptations and continue to pursue what is good, despite the difficulties we face? The virtue of fortitude frees us from allowing these everyday trials to overcome us and strengthens us in accomplishing what is good, despite these challenges.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that fortitude is expressed in two ways:

Attack: Practicing fortitude through attack means addressing difficulties head-on and directly, acting rather than standing still or giving up. When we are facing difficult circumstances or when an opportunity to do something great arises, most of us are tempted to hesitate, give up, not give our best, let the opportunity go unanswered, or ignore problems hoping they will somehow go away. Responding to challenges and opportunities directly might mean that we speak up when silence feels safer, seize opportunities even if we are afraid of the outcome, or fight for just causes. Fortitude in attack doesn't seek danger for its own sake, rather it accepts danger as the necessary cost of doing what is right.

Endurance: Fortitude through endurance means

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bearing our difficulties well, and over time, possibly surrendering to hard circumstances peacefully. It has two supporting virtues: patience, the ability to bear hardship without being overcome by sadness, anger, or resentment; and perseverance, the ability to remain steadfast through long, difficult circumstances. Exemplifying fortitude through endurance may look like battling long and painful illnesses, fighting for your marriage, or persisting through difficult projects at school and work. A soul grounded in fortitude through endurance is willing to stand its ground until God's work is done.

When the authorities gave Eleazar the choice between eating pork or going to the torture rack, he practiced fortitude through attack. He spit out the pork and walked to the torture rack for the purpose of standing up for his faith. When offered the chance to preserve his life by pretending to eat pork, he didn't even consider it. He acted by dying with honor instead of living in deceit.

Eleazar also practiced fortitude through perseverance. His second decision, the refusal to lie to save his life, resulted in persecution unto death. Despite intense bodily pain and suffering, Eleazar courageously endured the agony, honoring God with his entire life. Like Christ, he loved God and others "to the end" (Jn 13:1).

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How do we become capable of an act as great as Eleazar's? By committing to the virtue of fortitude daily in small ways. Whether it's a situation that requires patient endurance or bold action, virtues get stronger with repeated practice, and, over time, they become part of our character. Having the fortitude to give one's life begins with everyday acts of courage: choosing not to whine and complain when things aren't going well; mustering up the courage to ask someone on a date when we are nervous about getting turned down; providing boundaries for our children that may go against the current of the culture; persevering in our school work when it's difficult, no one else is studying, or our teacher seems unfair; and choosing to have difficult but necessary conversations with our loved ones to work out problems.

Application: Magnanimity

Although we only glimpse a short part of Eleazar's long life, it is clear he was a man of magnanimity. His martyrdom didn't come out of nowhere. He was likely magnanimous with his family, his friends, and the people in his community—generous with his time, service, kindness, and mercy. His martyrdom was not a mere act of duty, but a continuation of his generous gift of himself to others throughout his life.

Magnanimity is not a word we often hear in our everyday conversations, yet it is something we all

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long to embody. Magnanimity means “greatness of soul.” It is a sub-virtue of fortitude which enables us to go beyond merely avoiding evil or fulfilling our basic duties and to pursue what is great and honorable for the sake of blessing the people around us. St. Thomas Aquinas once called it, “the ornament of all virtues.”¹ The magnanimous person gives the very best of himself to accomplish great things, especially in service to other people.

When we generously give the very best of ourselves to others, we are living magnanimity. This means that we go above and beyond in our loving generosity to others in our community, parish, family, and friendships. Magnanimity might mean practicing harder and longer to ensure that you can support your teammates better in the game. It might mean volunteering at school or working to serve your community when no one else is stepping up. Magnanimous family members will go out of their way to bestow thoughtful, generous acts of kindness and service on their spouses, children, and siblings, anticipating their needs and fully engaging with them.

The virtue of magnanimity is the difference between dropping a check in the collection basket and hosting the poor at your table for a meal each day

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Q. 129, Art. 4, accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3129.htm> February 23, 2016.

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like St. Gregory the Great. Or between a father merely buying his daughter a generic birthday present and planning the perfect evening for her with a fancy dinner, flowers, china plates, and her favorite dessert followed by her favorite movie. It's not only extending forgiveness but working for the good of those who persecute us (Think of Jean Valjean, for example, in *Les Misérables*, when he freed the man who had been working to put him in prison—and might still do so—despite an angry mob clamoring for his execution!).

When we are regularly seeking comfort, consumption, and entertainment, however, we are not training our spirits to be capable of magnanimity. Rather, we end up choosing “smallness of soul”, or pusillanimity, which leaves us with that empty feeling of mediocrity, wishing we were doing something more for others with our lives.

Imagine if Eleazar had chosen to ignore the call to greatness. What if, to avoid pain, he ate pork to save his life. Would we know his name today? What would have been said about this great teacher of the law? What kind of example would he have left for those coming after him?

Instead, his decision to act magnanimously was so consequential that he became the model of courage for the entire nation of Israel and, eventually, for the

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Church. Church fathers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazianzus preached about his courageous act and considered him a pre-Christian martyr who set the example for those who would lay down their lives during Christian persecutions.²

What kind of impact do you want to have—with your friends, your children, your community, your Church? Where might God be inviting you to be more generous with your life and do great things for others? What do you hope others will recognize about your character? What example do you want to set for future generations? These questions encourage us to think beyond what is comfortable in the moment and give us a long-term vision of something worth giving everything for.

² John Chrysostom, “*On Eleazar and the Seven Boys*,” homily delivered one day before a feast at the shrine of the Maccabean Martyrs (pre-Christian Jewish martyrs of Antioch), Portal @ SDS Oxford, accessed at https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/E02697_John_Chrysostom_in_his_homily_On_Eleazar_and_the_Seven_Boys_delivered_one_day_before_a_feast_held_at_a_shrine_of_the_Maccabean_Martyrs_pre-Christian_Jewish_martyrs_of_Antioch_S00303_in_the_outskirts_of_Constantinople_defends_the_vali/13825523 September 4, 2025.

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DISCUSSION

2 Mac 6:18–22
2 Mac 6:23–29
2 Mac 6:30–31

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever had the opportunity to be courageous in the face of some great evil or difficulty? How did you react?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Most of us want our lives to tell a story of greatness. We long to leave a legacy of hard work, honesty, and success. Accomplishing such a legacy, however, requires fortitude (also called courage), the virtue that enables us to endure suffering, overcome hardships, and stay faithful to God despite difficulties.

Share a brief introduction to the virtue of Fortitude (or courage; firmness and/or constancy in the pursuit of the good; resists temptation/obstacles in the moral life; not a lack of fear but persistence despite fear). Refer to CCC 1808.

To gain a better understanding of this great virtue, we turn to the second book of Maccabees, where

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we find a man undergoing the ultimate test.

Eleazar was advanced in years, revered by his community, and known for his impeccable character and wisdom. But, toward the end of his life, the situation around him changed. The Jews were under relentless persecution by the pagan Greeks, and Eleazar had been singled out. He is threatened with death if he refuses to publicly eat pork, which is forbidden by his Jewish faith.

Read 2 Mac 6:18–22

02. Write an observation question that draws out Eleazar's reaction to this persecution.

Answers may include: Eleazar welcomes death instead of eating the forbidden meat, spitting it out on the ground rather than be “polluted” by unclean foods. He walks to his death on his own accord.

Please read aloud: Eleazar pursues the good both by what he does and by what he refuses to do. Hoping to break his resolve, his persecutors present him with a temptation.

03. How do Eleazar's persecutors attempt to “reason” with him? What makes their proposal so compelling?

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Answer: Eleazar's persecutors encourage him to "fake it," pretending to eat the forbidden meat. It's a compelling temptation. Such a pretense would allow him to avoid both violating the law (technically) as well a torturous death.

Please read aloud:

Like all virtues, practicing fortitude grounds us in the middle of two extremes—what St. Thomas Aquinas called vices of excess and vices of defect. In this case, the first extreme is cowardice. The coward shrinks away from pursuing the good when he encounters difficulty, pain, fear, or danger. On the other end of the spectrum is recklessness. The reckless man chases after thrills, taking senseless risks in the name of bravery.

04. Which of these extremes is being proposed to Eleazar, a temptation to cowardice or recklessness? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: It's a temptation to cowardice. Eleazar is being tempted to forsake the good (dying and giving witness to his faith) to avoid pain and death.

Please read aloud:

Let's see how Eleazar responds.

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Read 2 Mac 6:23-29

05. The coward throws away good or even holy things for the sake of avoiding pain, difficulty, or danger. In rejecting this temptation to cowardice, what goods does Eleazar preserve?

Answers may include: The goods of being "worthy of our time of life," giving the youth a "noble example" by dying for the "holy laws," and having a clean conscience before the judgement of God.

Please read aloud:

It's not merely that Eleazar rejects the evil consequences of pretending to eat the meat. He's also ennobled by the high goods that courage will bring in the greater context of his situation.

Fortitude often operates in this way by putting suffering in its proper context. Jesus told us not to fear those who can kill the body, but those who can destroy the soul and the body in hell (Mt 10:28). With this teaching, He revealed that certain things, such as loving God and standing for justice and truth, are more important than self-preservation.

06. Eleazar appeals to various things he considers more important than self-preservation (E.g., his own honor and

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example, the good of his nation, a clean conscience before God). How do Eleazar's persecutors react to his logic? Do they seem to share his convictions?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: They believe that he's speaking "sheer madness," and become angry with him.

07. Why do you think that Eleazar's fortitude comes across as insanity to his persecutors? What does he see that they don't?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: To Eleazar's persecutors, dying to avoid eating a bit of meat seems like madness because they lack Eleazar's "eternal perspective" (the ability to see with clarity how our actions echo beyond our own lives in eternity), as well as his moral imagination that perceives the great loss such a betrayal would be for those that look up to him.

Please read aloud:

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that fortitude operates in two different ways: in attack and in endurance. Practicing fortitude through attack means addressing difficulties head-on and directly, acting

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rather than standing still or giving up. Fortitude through endurance means bearing our difficulties well, and over time, possibly surrendering to hard circumstances peacefully. It has two supporting virtues: patience, the ability to bear hardship without being overcome by sadness, anger, or resentment; and perseverance, the ability to remain steadfast through long, difficult circumstances.

08. How does Eleazar practice "fortitude in attack"? What about "fortitude in endurance"?

Answer: Eleazar practices fortitude in attack by walking up to the rack. He practices fortitude in endurance by not eating the meat his persecutors attempt to force upon him. He will also endure his suffering with perseverance.

09. Think of a situation where you lacked courage in the past. What kind of larger perspective (or "eternal perspective") might have helped you to act with virtue instead?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Eleazar's eternal perspective lends him the courage to embrace pain and death. Though he likely felt great fear, he loved God and others "to the end"

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(Jn 13:1), though it seems like insanity to the world. But who will be vindicated in the end? Let's read about his death and the impact it has on others.

Read 2 Mac 6:30–31

10. Write an observation question about the effects of Eleazar's death.

Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include: Eleazar leaves a “memorial of courage” to all of Israel, particularly the young.

Please read aloud:

Many words could be employed to describe Eleazar's courage. One important one is magnanimity. Magnanimity means “greatness of soul.” It is the sub-virtue of fortitude that enables us to go beyond merely avoiding evil or fulfilling our basic duties, and pursue what is great and honorable. The magnanimous person gives the very best of himself to accomplish great things, especially in service to other people.

It's easy to miss this call to greatness and choose comfort and mediocrity instead. People do it every day. In receiving the call to do something great with our lives but refusing it (“this is too big for me”; “I could never do that”), one becomes pusillanimous.

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The pusillanimous man chooses “smallness of soul,” the path that's easier or more comfortable in the moment, but over time leaves him sad, empty, and wishing that he had done more with his life.

11. Imagine if Eleazar had chosen to ignore the call to greatness. What if, to avoid pain, he ate the pork to save his life. Would we know his name today? What would have been said about this great teacher of the law? How does Eleazar exemplify magnanimity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Eleazar, after causing a great scandal and weakening the resolve of his people, would probably have faded into obscurity. He demonstrates magnanimity by choosing a truly great course of action and not simply doing the minimum.

Please read aloud:

Eleazar's decision to act magnanimously was so consequential that he became the model of courage for the entire nation of Israel and, eventually, for the Church. Church fathers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazianzus preached about his courageous act and considered him a pre-Christian martyr who set the example for those who would lay down their lives.

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12. Eleazar's story begs the question: Are you currently living in a magnanimous way that will inspire others to live for God and for heaven? If not, what prevents you from doing so? What could magnanimity look like in your current state of life?

Allow the group to discuss.

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