

We are in a series in the book of Acts called *Renewal*. We're taking a look at the early church to be renewed in who we were always meant to be and what we are always made to do. This morning's passage represents a significant shift in a number of ways, so it's a good time to review what's brought us to this point.

The book begins with Jesus telling his disciples they shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and will be witnesses in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That's the pattern Acts follows. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the church, a new community is formed in Jerusalem and getting a lot of attention, the Gospel is being preached and people are coming to faith in Christ and joining the work of the Kingdom.

Throughout the book, Luke uses summary passages to let us know what's going on. In 2:47, this new community has captivated the city of Jerusalem and we're told "**And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.**" And then, in Ch 6, we're told the "**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.**" The church is growing significantly in Jerusalem.

But this progress hasn't been without its difficulties. In Ch 4, Peter and John are arrested by the religious rulers after healing a man and preaching the Gospel. They are warned to stop proclaiming the name of Christ. The disciples responded by praying to God for boldness. In Ch 5, the chief priest had all the apostles arrested, told them to stop proclaiming the name of Christ, and had them beaten. The apostles responded by rejoicing for being considered worthy for suffering for the name of Christ. And that brings us to this morning's difficult and very challenging passage, where the stakes will become even higher. What started with a warning led to a beating and culminates with a killing. We focus this morning on a man named Stephen. If I had to describe Stephen in one word, it would be "fearless". He is the first Christian martyr and, I believe, an example and inspiration to us all.

Would you describe yourself as a fearless Christian? We have not historically had to face much persecution in this country, so you may not have had to consider that question, but times are changing, and if we aspire to live like the early church lived, we should expect to be treated as they were. A 2018 survey showed 40% of respondents believe people are faith are part of the problem, 8 out of 10 Christians believe their rights are being diminished, and only 1 out of 5 believe clergy are credible sources of wisdom and insight to today's problems. As "progressive" ideology takes our culture further away from the truth of the Gospel, it responds to those who hold fast to the Gospel by vilifying, canceling, deplatforming, exiling, insulting, and marginalizing them. How will we respond? Fear may be tempt us to opt out or go along to get along, compromising our beliefs, watering down the Gospel, and doing everything we can to avoid bumping up against the world. **But if we retreat, the Kingdom retracts.** Today's passage is a challenge to all of us individually and collectively as the church. Will we give into fear, or will we remain fearless for the sake of Christ? Stephen will show us that **the Kingdom advances when fearless believers lead the way.**

### **Fearlessness is empowered by the Spirit.**

In what has become a common theme in Acts, all we do is based on what God does through us.

[Acts 6:8-15] <sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

We met Stephen last week as one chosen to care for the Hellenist widows. He was described there as full of the Spirit and wisdom and here as being full of grace and power. These are all characteristics of his spiritual state. He is so devoted to the cause of Christ and so emptied of his own agenda that God has filled him and is working mightily through him. He’s now doing what, up to this point, was only done by the apostles. And he’s getting noticed and being confronted. By the power of the Spirit, he does not retreat but, instead, is enabled to answer any charge they throw at him. His life, his words and actions, and even his appearance are all evidence of God’s work in and through him.

Can people tell something different about you? Does the unbelieving world notice you? Do you have the courage to stand out? **What was said of Stephen in this passage can be said of each and every one of us.** We can be full of the Spirit, wisdom, grace, and power. You may not have the face of an angel, but there can be something noticeable in the way you carry yourself and live your life that is evidence of being full of the Spirit. But for us to be full of the Spirit we have to be near the Spirit. If you are living far from God you won’t rally in the moment of resistance. You won’t be able to talk about someone you don’t know. I can’t tell you much about my Grandpa Joseph because I only met him once. If our one moment with God is our moment of salvation, we won’t have much to say about him when the opportunity presents itself. We also won’t stand fast when resistance comes because we won’t have been emboldened by the power of the Spirit. I learned early in my parenting that, if my boys were scared of something, I could ask “Would you like me to go with you?” as a way to encourage them. My presence diminished their fear, and God’s love casts out our fear. **The more full of the Spirit we are, the less we’ll fear when the world pushes back.** The more we experience God’s presence, the more willing we’ll be to go forward. That’s why Stephen perseveres here, and that’s how we can too.

They can’t refute him, so they hatch a plot against him to accuse him of blasphemy, which is punishable by death. This plot is one of the significant shifts in this chapter because, up to this point, persecution came only from the religious authorities. But here, the people are included. It’s clear he’s teaching Jesus and the things Jesus taught. Remember, Jesus himself said the temple would be destroyed, and said he didn’t come to abolish the Law but fulfill it. They were having none of it. Jews believed the person of God was housed in the temple, the Mosaic Law was their path to righteousness, and the blessings of God were only for them. Even Christians were still following the rhythm of Jewish worship.

The Gospel has been bumping up against the beliefs of the world for 2,000 years, and when that happens, the world pushes back. But **fearlessness boldly speaks the truth about God, sin, and salvation.**

Stephen responds with what is the longest speech in all of Acts. [Acts 7:1-2b] **And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared...”** We don’t have time to read it this morning, but I would encourage you to do so because it’s a tremendous history of Israel including Abraham, the exodus and prophecy of Moses that another like him would come to Israel, and Solomon and the building of the Temple. Stephen tells the story of God and answers his accusers. Through it, he shows how God’s salvation program has changed and progressed over time, how his blessings have not been limited to the Jewish people or the land of Israel, how God made clear the temple could not be his home but, instead, represents his presence, and how Israel had a history of opposing God’s plans and the people he sent to speak for him. It’s been said those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. Stephen would agree.

[Acts 7:51-53]<sup>51</sup> **“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.<sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,<sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”**

Stephen had obviously not read How to Win Friends and Influence People. Through his speech and confrontational words, he showed how God’s program had changed once again, how Jesus fulfilled the Law, rendering the temple and sacrificial system obsolete, how God desires to bless all the people of the world, not just Israel, and how Jesus was the one they had been promised and were waiting for. The Righteous One is another name for the Messiah, prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah. But just like their ancestors had done, the Jews of the day had rejected God’s sent one, this time his Son and their Messiah, and continued the pattern of disobedience. Stephen had boldly told the story of God, confronted them on their sin, and sought their repentance.

Do we have to be this confrontational? No, not necessarily. But we do need to be this bold and clear. It is a heck of a thing to say there is one way, one truth, one life, and you know what it is. Popularity contests aren’t won by saying all people are sinners, fall short of God’s glory, are separated from him by our sin, and don’t have the ability to make up for it. **But the good news of Jesus only matters to someone if they accept the bad news they are helpless to fix.** God does not tell us to judge, to condemn, convict, or convince. He asks us to tell who he is, who we are in light of that, and what he’s done through Jesus to bring us back together forever. Do you know the story of God well enough to tell it? I have heard many Christians lament “I had the opportunity to talk about Jesus, but I didn’t know what to say.” **The more we know God’s story, the less fearful we’ll be in boldly declaring it.**

[Acts 7:54-60]<sup>54</sup> **Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.<sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.<sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”<sup>57</sup> But they cried**

**out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”**

**Fearlessness is anchored in eternity.**

Stephen was fearless because he knew this wasn't the end. By the grace of God he was given a glimpse into heaven. The story he told began with the glory of God and here he witnesses it, along with seeing Jesus, whom he calls the Son of Man. That's a title Jesus used often for himself. Stephen is the only other to refer to him in this way. It is a messianic title that comes from the book of Daniel, this Son of Man who will offer salvation to all people. Stephen could have retreated in this moment to save his life but, instead, he took one more opportunity to proclaim Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is God. And as they began to stone him, he cried out for Jesus to receive his spirit. It is an expression of desperation, an expression of hope, and expression of faith that there is a life that follows this one, so give all of this one to God.

We hold on so tightly to this life because we've allowed ourselves to believe it's supposed to satisfy us completely, but it can't. **The best is yet to come**, and starting with Stephen, we'll see New Testament character after New Testament character place their hope in eternity so they can live out their lives fully and fearlessly for God. But if we struggle to believe that, if we are anchored in the present life, we will do all we can to protect it. Fear will keep us from risk, fear will keep silent. But I want you to consider this: death is the worst thing that can happen to us. I don't say that flippantly. My death would cause tremendous grief for my family. I don't romanticize death. Scripture calls it an enemy that Christ will defeat in the end. But if you know Jesus, death is not the end. What is on the other side of death is infinitely better. In the words of Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

And I don't want you to miss this. Did you notice Jesus is *standing*? The New Testament most often says Jesus will ascend and be *seated* at the right hand of the Father. Here he's standing, and the thought is that he's doing it to honor and welcome Stephen into eternity. I want you consider that your Savior is watching you, he's rooting for you, and he responds to your faithfulness to him. This past week I attended a concert by Christian's orchestra, and it was amazing. When it was over, we all stood up and applauded. Jesus stands to honor you and welcome you when your time is up. It may not be visible but know your labor in his name is never in vain. It is anchored in the hope of eternity.

**Fearlessness loves God and loves others.**

As one who loves Jesus, Stephen's life ends in the same way as his Savior's. Rather than condemning those who are stoning him, he loudly prays they be forgiven. He wants them to come to faith in Jesus and be reconciled to their God. Because of his love for his God and his love for his fellow man, he fearlessly lays it all on the line to proclaim the Gospel. I can only imagine in the days that follow what those men thought when they remembered the man they were killing was praying for their salvation.

Our call is to be so burdened for the salvation of man that we cast aside fear and do whatever it takes to make Jesus' name known. **God does not want to use us to win arguments. He wants to use us to win souls.** When the priority of our life is to love God and love others like God loves them, fear retreats, and we are all in.

As you consider this passage in your Life Groups and on your own this week, I want to encourage you to ask yourself the question: **Where do I draw the line for what I'm willing to give up for the cause of Christ?** Where does fear win? Is it reputation, employment, money, your own will, your life? This is not intended to be a shame-inducing exercise but a clarifying one. Take it to God, process it with him, and ask him to show you what's holding you back. It could be you are far away from him, you aren't clear on his story, your hope is in the now, or you not as burdened for those who don't know Jesus as he would want you to be. Ask him to change your heart and your actions so that you can overcome and live fearlessly for him.

I want to close this morning by telling you about Muriel Barker, an example of fearlessness. Muriel passed away last month but had been part of Fellowship Dallas for a long time. We supported she and her husband, Milt, as they devoted their lives to sharing the Gospel with the Muong people of Vietnam. Their work was centered around developing a written language for their spoken language and then translating that into the New Testament. They lived in Saigon from 1958-1975, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the horrors committed by the Communist forces from the north. The Gospel was not welcome, and she told a story of once having to hide under a bridge while soldiers searched for them. It would have been easy to, in fear, leave. But they stayed, continued their work after leaving and, at the end of last year the Muong New Testament was published. Her fearless devotion and love of her Lord and the Muong people of Vietnam led to her finishing her work. She had her homecoming in January, and I like to think Jesus was standing when she arrived.

I don't know what God is going to call you to, and I don't know what you'll face as you live that out. What I do know, though, is that it probably won't be easy, and it will take courage. **But when we live fearlessly, the Kingdom will advance.** As you go, remember that God is with you, God is working through you, and God is watching you, and he will see you through until the very end.