

Harris Creek Baptist Church
Drew Greenway
Series: Stories from Acts
July 24, 2022

Bold and Courageous Faithfulness

Acts 6 & 7

Harris Creek, how are we doing? (Crowd cheers.) So good. Hey if have a Bible, get it out. If you have pen and paper or open up your notes app. We are going to learn some Scripture today.

Hey, if you don't know me, I am Drew, I am one of the pastors here and I grew up in the great state of Arkansas. Yeah! Yes, there are other states besides Texas. Most Texans don't know that. Arkansas borders Texas and I have found as I have lived here that Texans have some stereotypes they think of when they think of Arkansans. Can you guys just tell me a few? Just say them out loud. What is that? Hillbilly, yeah that is fair. What else? Whoo Pig! Whoo pig sooie, come on. That is true. Usually you get a "no shoes, no shirt, no problem" that is an Arkansas thing. They like hunting, fishing. Yeah, so there are lots of stereotypes about Arkansans – marry your cousin, that is one. That one is not as true. But yeah, those are all mostly true.

And so, I grew up in a small town in Arkansas, about an hour southeast of Little Rock. In that town was a farming community, all the stereotypes are true there. Especially of my neighbors. We lived on a dirt road in town. I didn't know that was possible, but we did. We lived on a dirt road in town and my neighbors lived across the field from us. So not just right next door to us, but across the field. And just about everyday you could go outside, and you could smell a stench in the air, and you would be like, "What is that?" And you could look across and they would have something in their yard that they were skinning. I mean this is every day. I'm like, "I didn't know there were that many animals to be killed." But there were.

So, they actually had a son about my age and so we grew up together. He was one of those friends, you may have had one of these friends, where your friends most of the time. So, we would be playing together and be friends and then all of a sudden, he would do something, or I would do something and then we would be enemies. It just went back and forth with that as we grew up.

Fast forward to junior high and we are riding the bus together every day on the way home from school. And this friend was a little bit bigger than me, and he started to bully me. So, day after day he would bully me until I would get home. Until finally, one day, I had had enough, and I told my dad when I got home. I said, "Hey, I don't want to ride the bus anymore. He keeps bullying me." My dad, who was a pastor, would not normally give this advice but he said, "Hey, you have my permission to punch him in the face." And so, I am like, "Okay, here we go!"

So that night, my wheel starts spinning, right. As a junior higher. And I am thinking about do I hold my thumb under here? Do I do it like this? So, I decided I was going to punch him in the throat, so it didn't hurt my hand. I am picturing the entire thing happening. So, I barely sleep at

all. The next morning, I go to school. Period after period I am looking for him in the hallway and planning my attack when I get on the bus. I have actually decided that I would do it when I got off the bus so I wouldn't get in trouble on the bus.

So, that is actually what I want to talk to you about today is courage. About the courage that it took to face my fears. I guess I should tell you guys what happened. So, the last bell rings. My heart is racing! I go out to the bus stop. I go out and I get on the bus, and he wasn't there. He didn't ride the bus that day. So, Chad, if you are watching this, you turned out to be a great guy. Please don't beat me up. Okay?

But I want to talk today not just about a moment of courage, but moments of courage. A lifetime of courage that comes from faithfulness. We are going to look at this amazing story in Acts 6 & 7 of Stephen the martyr.

If you want to go ahead and grab your Bibles, we are going to look at Acts 6&7. Today we are going to see a picture of what bold and courageous faithfulness looks like. What bold and courageous faithfulness looks like. I think it is very helpful on the onset for us to define what exactly faithfulness is. So, if you are a notetaker write this down. Faithfulness is to be steadfast in affection or allegiance. To be steadfast in affection or allegiance.

We are going to see how the steadfastness of Stephen in little moments prepared him for the big moments. And we are going to see how faithfulness enables followers of Christ to step in. How faithfulness empowers His followers to step up. And finally, today, we are going to see how faithfulness emboldens followers of Jesus to step out.

You know in America we have a hard time when we read Acts understanding what it was truly like for them to be persecuted for their faith. We have comfortable lives. It is easy to be a Christian in 2022 here where we live. And I think often times comfort is the enemy of courage. Comfort is the enemy of courage. Our lack of need often times equals a lack of faith in our lives. We would like to think that if someone put a gun to our heads and asked us if we are willing to die for our faith if we love Jesus, that it would be an easy yes. But most of the time we just can't even answer that because our faith is so untested. We don't know how we would answer that.

Even more, you know this true on social media, we surround ourselves with people who agree with us. With people who are for us. With people who think, and act just like us. Many of the times, and I fall prey to this myself, we just need to start getting more comfortable with not being liked. I think of John 15, where Christ said you are going to be hated for what you believe. And that is a hard passage for us to understand.

And as JP said last week, so many of us are just having to learn how to not find our worth in the approval of other people. It is what God thinks about us that matters. So today, we are going to see in this story that Stephen was one who certainly did not live for the approval of man, and it ended up costing him his life.

As we are going to read, he was ready when the moment came because of his lifetime of faithfulness. So, as I said, we are going to be in chapters 6&7 in Acts. To recap where we have been in this series, we have been going through these significant stories in Acts. So, Jesus has

died, He rose again, and He ascended into heaven. And before He did that, He created the church, the local church which is still in existence today – that is how you are in these seats. And He told them to go and make disciples across the ends of the earth. So, this is Luke’s orderly account of all the stories that happened in the book of Acts.

Week 1 – we learned about Pentecost, the descending of the Holy Spirit onto the earth and the Church was established then. Peter became the head of the church.

Week 2 – we looked at Acts 2 and what the early church looked like. What they did. How they met. How they gathered. We found out that they shared the Gospel like Jesus was coming back at any moment and found that challenge for us.

Week 3 – we saw a story of healing and the power of the Holy Spirit on full display. At this point, the church has gained tons of momentum and thousands, and thousands of people are coming to the faith.

Last week JP talked about a slight pause in the momentum of the church. This cautionary story of Ananias and Saphira. How their need to manage perception caused them to sin. And their disobedience actually ended up killing them.

This week, we have another death story. Two death stories in a row. Except in this one it wasn’t disobedience that killed Stephen, it was obedience. So, some back story on Stephen. Stephen was actually the first documented martyr in Scripture; the first documented martyr in Scripture. We are going to see in chapter 6 that he was a deacon. And he was a man full of faith it says in the Holy Spirit. He was one of the seven chosen by the twelve apostles to take care of the widows in the distribution of food. And that is what a deacon was in the early church and a lot of times in the present day we think of deacons as overseers or people who make decisions, but a deacon back then was just someone who served.

The first half of Acts, up until this point, has been about Peter. This giant in our faith. And then the last half of Acts, as we are going to see, is actually about Paul. We are going to read about Paul today who is known as Saul. In fact, we are going to see that he is standing there holding the coats of those stoning Stephen when he is persecuting the church.

You can see here in this Rembrandt painting from 1625 (picture shows on screen) you have Paul there at the very top holding the coats of the Sanhedrin as they stone Stephen. This is a well-documented story in Christian history because it was really this story that set the trajectory of Christianity to all over the world. Just think about if you stepped on an ant hill and they just scattered everywhere, that is what happened in this story of Stephen.

It is also well-documented because martyrdom throughout Christian history has been the ultimate way, it is seen as the ultimate way, to show your faithfulness to God. And one last interesting note as we get started, the Greek word for witness is mártys. Which is where we get the word martyr from. And we are going to see in this text why Stephen was seen as such a faithful witness to Christ.

So, turn in your Bibles to Acts 6, beginning in verse 1 – Acts 6:1. It says this, **In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.**

So, to recap here, we have the early church, and it is exploding. They are adding to their numbers daily those who are being saved. And the apostles were overwhelmed with ministry, they could not do it all. So, they find seven faithful Greek speaking deacons among them to aid in the distribution to the widows who were Greek speaking who were being overlooked. This type of leadership should be very normal to us. We read this in Exodus 18. It is the model we use around here for our shepherds. We could not do it all, so we got these other people to step in and help. They laid hands on these guys and prayed for them, and they sent them out and it says the word of God spread. The number of disciples increased rapidly

So, it was the faithfulness of these deacons that aided in the spreading of the Gospel. And that leads me to point one.

1. Faithfulness enables followers of Christ to step in.

We don't know much about what Stephen and the other six were doing before they were called to be deacons, but we can assume a few things. 1) We do know in verse 3 that they were full of the spirit and wisdom. So, when you are looking for someone to help, look for someone who is full of the spirit and wisdom. 2) They were chosen, I think, because they were already ministering to people. And we know this to be true. When you are looking for help, when we at Harris Creek are looking for help, we are going to find those people who are already helping. The same is true for you guys.

About four months ago, I became a truck guy – I got a truck. And I started noticing that now that I have a truck people like to use me for my truck. So, the more I do that the more people go, “Hey Drew has a truck.” So, the same would be true here. As they are serving, as they are loving on people, the apostles are going to look up and go hey who is already doing this. We learn here that it is just as important to care for people as it is to preach the Gospel – they are one in the same. How do we know this? Look at verse 6 - **They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.** So here we have this traditional early church commissioning going on. There is such great importance placed on this job. It was a God-ordained job, and it was not lesser than. Them serving these people is not lesser than.

The apostles commissioned this group knowing it allows for the needs of the community to be met. The Gospel is advanced in both word and deed it says that in Colossians 3:17. Because this is true, when you meet someone's physical needs it enables them to see their spiritual needs as well. When you meet someone's physical needs it enables them to see their spiritual needs as well. And this allowed the body of Christ to be the body of Christ. What happens when they use their gift? The entire body is way more obedient.

Let's look at verse 7. It says, **So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.**

So, what do we see here? We see that when a church multiplied, it was because it was giving ministry away. This is a key part of our mission statement here at Harris Creek, that we want to empower members for service. That is why we talk about it all the time. And so, I want to tell you, if you are on the sidelines in ministry and you are waiting to be asked to be on the team you are doing it the wrong way. You just have to get in the game. Take a small step of obedience and find somewhere to serve and serve.

We have about 2500 members here at Harris Creek and about 500 of you are serving. We would love to boost that number a lot higher. I would love for every person in this room and who can hear my voice online – if you are a part of Harris Creek - find a way to serve. Of that 500, I just want to highlight a few people that are crushing it. There is Beau with the grass and actually I mentioned Beau in the first service, and someone told me after that, he is actually not here today because he is also serving someone else by mowing their grass. Beau comes all the time and takes care of our grass in the 100-degree heat. He is passionate about making sure our grass looks good and serves in that way. I think of Brady who takes care of our baptistry and comes up here and helps with building projects. I think of Jennifer and her team who are serving the orphans in Waco and the underprivileged. The list could go on, I could name lots of people. My ask is that you would join those people. Don't wait on a sign from God.

We have three boys and our youngest is actually adopted. People will sit down with me all the time and ask, "What was it that led you to adopt?" they want to hear that story. And I will tell you that it was not a burning bush, God told us to adopt, moment at first. We simply felt a nudge to do that, and we got the paperwork from this agency in Fort Worth, and I stuck it in my backpack and then it stayed in my backpack for a while. And then my wife and I were on a breakfast date one day and we just decided to get the form out, fill it out, and send it in. Let's take a step of obedience. And that led to another form, actually countless forms. And then we go to Fort Worth, and we go to the first interest meeting where they talk about adoption and our hearts kind of got around it. Eventually, two years later after just a process of our hearts getting around adoption. We finally had this passion for adoption, and we were able to adopt our son. It didn't start with this big God-sized moment, it started with a faithful step.

It doesn't have to be something you are passionate about. Maybe it just means you see a need and you meet a need. God may even awaken that passion in you as you meet those needs. I am going to say it again, if you are waiting for an invitation to serve this is it right now. Go do it! Feel empowered to serve.

Alright, moving on! So, we are going to see what happens next in Stephen in this next section of Scripture. As he faithfully steps in, God is going to empower him to step up in a big way. We are going to go back to the text now. Acts 6, now starting in verse 8 – let’s go there. It says this in verse 8. **Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say we have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God. So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

Okay, here we go. This is where it is getting good. Stephen is doing his ordinary ministry and meanwhile God is calling him to something extraordinary. We learn that Stephen is not just a man now full of faith and the Holy Spirit. But now he is full of God’s grace and power – if you want to underline that in the Scriptures. He is full of grace and power. He is doing great signs and wonders among the people as it says in verse eight.

This does not sit well with the religious leaders of the day. So, what do they do? They cancel him. They stir up a mob. They bring false witnesses against him, and they bring him before the Sanhedrin – who at the time were the keepers of the law. That brings me to point two.

2. Faithfulness empowers followers of Christ to step up.

Let’s look back at the text, there are some things that I want us to notice here today. The Jewish leaders are furious at Stephen for the same reasons that they killed Christ. He was challenging their traditions and their customs of Mosaic law. He was proclaiming that Jesus alone could forgive their sins, they hated this. Then in verse 10, it says they could not stand up against the wisdom the spirit gave him as he spoke.

I want us to notice here that God has empowered Stephen with the wisdom directly from the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us, this is going to happen in Romans 8:11. Romans 8:11 says this, **And if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.** So we are going to see here that Stephen is full of this very power, this Holy Spirit given power that man cannot stand up against. His courage, all of his courage, came from that power. This is what gave him the boldness to go from Stephen the Deacon to Stephen the Martyr. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

He was empowered, not just in that moment, but because of years of faithfulness in that background. Years of faithfulness of serving and loving and caring and being faithful.

Something I think that God wants to root out of us, in Waco, Texas and in America, is our obsession with influence. We are obsessed with influence and how to get it. I think the idea that influence has actually become a label and a noun is proof enough of that. And I am not here today, if you are an influencer watching or you want to be one, I am not here today to say that those platforms and audiences aren't God given. You can certainly use those things for His glory. But when we try to grasp and influence the wrong ways, we get in trouble.

We are going to see here that the reason Stephen was given influence was because it started with him being a servant. That is how you get influence in the kingdom of God; you start by serving. Jesus said as much in Matthew 20:8. It says, **The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.** So, the application here is pretty simple. Live out what it says in Micah 6:8. I think Stephen was just simply doing justice. He was loving mercy. And he was walking humbly with God. We are going to see what it got him. It got him cancelled. It got him killed. And that is a possible outcome of faithfulness for all of us. Are we willing to risk it all for the sake of Christ? Are we willing to speak up for the marginalized people in our day? Are we willing to step in with courage? Are we willing to be peace and Shalom to a world where there is desperate need for peace?

This is the question I have to ask myself everyday as a recovering people pleaser. Am I truly willing to let the Holy Spirit to empower me to speak truth when the world loves what is false? They love what is false. What is going to happen if I do that? The world may hate me. What if I am not well liked? What if I do not have a ton of followers on social media because of that? Am I okay with that? And I want to tell you, Stephen would have been okay with that. Stephen was okay with that.

What we are actually going to read next is a climax of the story. It is going to show us how Stephen was emboldened by God for the sake of the Gospel which is our last point.

3. Faithfulness emboldens followers of Christ to step out.

We are going to jump back into the text now. Now chapter 7 and we are actually going to begin in verse 51. You may notice we are skipping 50 whole verses of Scripture and so I am going to summarize that for us. Stephen basically lays out to the Sanhedrin the entire story of the Old Testament. We are going to find out that Stephen is actually a very studied individual. He has spent time in the word of God. He is going to give them the greatest hits of the Old Testament. He is going to talk about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. He is going to talk about Joseph and his story. He is going to talk about slavery in Egypt. He is going to talk about Moses and how God's people continually went towards God and away from God and back towards God. And what he is going to do is here he is simply reminding the Sanhedrin that they are actually lining up directly with their rebellious ancestors. He is saying, "Hey you are doing the very same things they did." He is telling them, "Hey you killed the very same savior that came to release you from the bondage of sin and slavery. You killed him."

So here we go, in verse 51 of chapter 7. It says this, **"You stiff-necked people with your uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those**

who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect by the angels but have not obeyed it.” When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Man, what a powerful story of courage we read there. He tells them to simply just repent and turn to Christ and he blames them for the death of Jesus. At this, they become furious, and they gnash their teeth. I do not know what gnashing your teeth is – it does not sound good to me. But we see this vivid picture of the execution of Stephen. They even cover their ears when they drag him out of the city, and they stone him to death.

Some things that I want us to notice in this text. Firstly, if you will look at verse 55 it says that Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit. Luke is reminding us yet again where Stephen’s power comes from. It does not come from himself; it comes from Jesus. It comes from the Holy Spirit. Secondly, as Stephen is being killed, he sees heaven open, and he sees the Son of Man – underline Son of Man – standing at the right hand of God. The only other reference in the New Testament, other than Christ calling himself the Son of Man, is John in Revelation 1. The Son of Man is a title of humility. It is a title of humanity for Christ. It is saying Christ was actually a man who was here on earth. This is yet another way we see Stephen trying to reach these Jews that killed Christ. He is trying, even in his dying breath, to tell them who Jesus was.

And then lastly, something I never noticed before in reading this text, the text says that Jesus is standing at the right hand of the father. In every other text in Scripture, what do we hear? We hear that Jesus is sitting. In this moment, Jesus is standing at the right hand of the Father. Why is that? I am going to take some creative license here, but I think Luke is just trying to say, “Hey, Jesus wants people who are going to put the cross before them. He wants people who are willing to take up their own cross and follow.” Then it is as if he is standing there to receive His son to say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Lastly, verse 60 – one more thing I want us to notice. Stephen does not even blame them for what they are doing. He says, God do not hold this against them. This is just an aside for all of us. The ability to forgive is a huge indicator of a faithful believer. Your ability to forgive, my ability to forgive, is a huge indicator of a faithful believer. We see it in Stephen.

If you don’t remember anything else today, here is what I want you to know today. The little moments of faithfulness in Stephen’s life led to a big moment of faithfulness. The little moments led to the big moment. When Stephen needed boldness, the Spirit gave it to him. Jesus said that would happen in Matthew 10:19-20. Jesus said, **But when they arrest you, do not worry about**

what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say. For it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your father speaking through you. Man, what an encouragement that one is. He was just allowing God to speak through him. It was his faithfulness throughout his entire life that allowed God in that moment to speak exactly how He wanted to speak and do exactly what He wanted to do.

So that is the question that we all have to ask this morning. How can we have the boldness that Stephen had? How can we have the boldness that Stephen had? I am going to tell you; it is kind of a churchy answer. We have to remind ourselves of the Gospel of Jesus. We have to remind ourselves that Christ died and that He rose on our behalf. And it was nothing that we did to earn that. And it is then and only then that we roll up our sleeves and we get to work, and we start being faithful as we model what Stephen did and what Jesus did.

Us being a believer should cost us something. I am afraid in today's age in America, it doesn't cost us a lot. So, we have to find some ways for us to cost us something so that we can be found faithful in the end.

I love this quote by Martin Luther as we close. He says, "We need to hear the Gospel every day because we forget it every day." Man is that true. "We need to hear the Gospel every day because we forget it every day."

So, in summary: faithfulness enables followers to step in, it empowers followers to step up, and faithfulness emboldens followers of Christ to step out. Out of the safety and the comfort of our lives. I just want to close with this today. I want to look back at Stephen's life and so you have this guy – I don't know what he did for a living, but he was faithful in it. He did something to make money and yet he was serving in his church and year after year I could just seem him proving faithful as a servant in his church. Then when they look for someone to meet a need, he is there to meet that need. He steps in. And then we fast forward a little bit in his life and in a moment where he needs to step out in boldness, Christ gives him that strength. So, then you see next that Stephen is going around and doing miracles and signs and wonders for the kingdom of God. What does that get him? It gets him put on trial before the Sanhedrin. In a moment where he needs even more boldness he is empowered to step out and say, "Hey do whatever you want, I am proclaiming this guy name Jesus. He loves you." And then in his dying breath he is continuing to be faithful, and he says, "hey God forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Now, all of that should sound really familiar to us. Should it not? There is another man and Stephen modeled exactly what he did. It is almost as if Stephen just followed Christ around from a very early age. To see a man who is a carpenter, who lived a life of faithfulness, and then after thirty years he is called up into ministry. He goes and does signs and wonders. He proclaims that "I love you! I love all of you. You don't have to live the way that our ancestors did. You can receive the grace and the mercy that Christ offers. You can receive it from me." And what happens? It angers the Sanhedrin. He goes on trial before them, and they end up finding him guilty and he goes and dies a bloody gruesome death. On the cross, as he dies, he says, "God forgive them, they don't know what they are doing. They don't know."

So, as I think about that story, I tear up because it is so beautiful to think that Christ gives us that exact model. Stephen gives us that exact model to follow. That we would day after day choose lives of steadfast faithfulness. There are two people that I am talking to today. Some of you are crushing it. Some of you walked into this room today who have been dying to yourselves every day, who serve faithfully. I just want to say, "Way to go! Way to go!" And there is a second group, and you came in here today and you are hearing this and you are saying, "Man, I want that to be me it is just not me right now." I am here to tell you; it can be you starting today.

Christ and Stephen had years to develop that courage and boldness and it just takes simple steps of obedience starting today. So, my prayer is that even to our last faithful breaths, we would be able to stand and say "Hey God, I am for you. I love you. I want to make you known." May it be true of us today.

Let me pray.

Oh God, I am so grateful for your brother Stephen who is in heaven right now with the people who killed him, with Paul. What a story of redemption, God! God, I pray that we as your people, Harris Creek and the people listening, God would we be a people who are found faithful to you in our day to day. Would we be a steadfast people that even if we face death, God, even if we face hard circumstances we would choose to have your boldness and courage. That we would be empowered by your Holy Spirit in those moments. So, God, I just pray that as we go today, that as we respond today, would you make our hearts full of your grace and mercy. Full of your Holy Spirit to embolden us. To go and make disciples across the ends of the earth. God, to take small faithful steps of obedience. God, I pray know that as we sing, as we respond, would you have your way in us. In Christ's name, Amen