

What does it look like to stand firm in faith when everything around us is pressing in? In Acts 7, we find a story that cuts straight to the heart of that question. Stephen, facing a hostile crowd and false accusations, does not shrink back. Instead, he walks his accusers through the entire sweep of Israel's history, from Abraham to Moses to the prophets, to show them a pattern they had been blind to: God's people have a long tradition of rejecting the very ones God sends to deliver them. The message is pointed, courageous, and costly. But what makes Stephen's story so gripping is not just what he says, it is how he lives it out in his final moments. With stones flying, he lifts his eyes to heaven, sees Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, and breathes out a prayer of forgiveness for the very people killing him. This is not human strength. This is the treasure Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4, a surpassing, supernatural power housed in fragile, breakable jars of clay. We are those jars. Our bodies, our circumstances, our carefully arranged lives are all perishable and prone to cracking. But the treasure within, Christ himself, is unshakeable. The central invitation here is to stop clinging to the broken pieces of the pot and start fixing our eyes on the one who is our firm foundation. When we do, we discover that joy and peace are not waiting on the other side of fixed circumstances. They are available right now, in the middle of the mess, because Jesus is present right now.

Title: Faithful Through the Fire: Sharing Hope and Standing Firm in Christ

Sermon Summary: Drawing from Acts chapter 7, this sermon examines the life and death of Stephen as a model of faithful witness under extreme persecution. The pastor highlights how Stephen, standing before the Sanhedrin on false charges, did not shrink back but instead used the moment as an opportunity to proclaim the truth of Christ. Stephen's defense traced Israel's history of rejecting God's appointed deliverers, ultimately confronting the religious leaders with their own pride and rebellion. The sermon calls believers to always be ready to share the hope they have in Christ, to remain faithful through suffering with their eyes fixed on Jesus rather than on earthly circumstances, and to love and forgive even their enemies. Using the imagery of treasure in jars of clay from 2 Corinthians 4, the pastor challenges the congregation to stop clinging to the broken pieces of their earthly circumstances and instead find their firm foundation in Christ, who is eternal and unshakeable.

Key Points:

- Believers must always be ready to share the hope they have in Christ, being sensitive to the heart barriers that keep people from him
- Stephen identified the pride and rebellion of the religious leaders by showing how their ancestors repeatedly rejected those God sent to deliver them
- Jesus is looking for men and women who will remain faithful through suffering, and he is fully aware of every trial his people face
- Stephen's focus was on being faithful to Christ despite his earthly situation, knowing that a better resurrection awaited him
- Our physical lives are like jars of clay, fragile and breakable, but the treasure within, Christ himself, can never be taken away
- Genuine love for enemies is evidence that we are children of God, and Stephen demonstrated this by asking God not to hold his killers' sin against them

Scripture Reference:

- Acts 7 (primary passage, Stephen's defense and martyrdom)
- 1 Peter 3:14-16, which calls believers to be prepared to give a reason for the hope they have, with gentleness and respect
- 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, in which Paul describes finding strength and delight in weakness because God's grace is sufficient
- Hebrews 11:35, which references those who refused release in order to gain a better resurrection
- 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, describing the treasure of the gospel carried in fragile jars of clay
- 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, describing the contrast between the perishable body and the imperishable resurrection body
- 1 Corinthians 15:19, warning against placing hope only in this earthly life
- Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus teaching his followers to love their enemies as proof of being children of God
- Romans 5:8, which declares that God demonstrated his love by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners

Stories:

- Stephen's trial and martyrdom in Acts 7, in which he rehearsed Israel's history of rejecting God's deliverers before being stoned to death while forgiving his killers
- The biblical account of Joseph being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, used by Stephen to illustrate Israel's pattern of rejecting those God appointed
- The biblical account of Moses being rejected by his own people before being sent back by God as their deliverer, also used to illustrate the same pattern
- The pastor's personal account of sensing God's leading to minister to a waitress at a restaurant in the Dells, asking if they could pray for her needs, resulting in a meaningful spiritual encounter
- The illustration of a physical clay pot brought to the service, used to represent the fragile human body that houses the eternal treasure of Christ

Here is a list of all scripture references mentioned or alluded to in the sermon:

Acts 6 - The false charges brought against Stephen Acts 7:1-60 - Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin, his speech, and his martyrdom 1 Peter 3:14-16 - Being prepared to give a reason for the hope we have, with gentleness and respect 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 - Paul pleading three times for his thorn to be removed, and God's grace being sufficient Hebrews 11:35 - Those who were tortured, refusing release, to obtain a better resurrection 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 - The treasure in jars of clay, hard-pressed but not crushed 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 - The resurrection body sown perishable and raised imperishable 1 Corinthians 15:19 - If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied Matthew 5:43-48 - Loving enemies as proof of being children of God Romans 5:8 - God demonstrating his love in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners

Luke 23:34 - Jesus asking the Father to forgive those crucifying him Matthew 16:23 - Jesus rebuking Peter, telling him to get behind him Galatians 5:22-23 - The fruit of the Holy Spirit Acts 1:8 - The Holy Spirit empowering believers to be witnesses Colossians 1:27 - Christ in you, the hope of glory

Stephen used his knowledge of Israel's history to address the specific heart barriers of his audience -- how do you seek to understand the spiritual barriers of those around you before sharing the hope you have in Christ?

The sermon highlights a pattern of God's people rejecting the very deliverers God sent them -- in what ways might we today be resistant to what God is doing that does not fit our expectations or routines?

Stephen's face glowed with peace even as he stood accused before the Sanhedrin -- what does the presence or absence of that kind of peace in your own trials reveal about where your eyes are truly fixed?

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12 that God's power is made perfect in weakness, and that he had learned to delight in hardships -- what would it look like practically for you to move from merely enduring your current trials to actually delighting in them for Christ's sake?

The sermon uses the image of treasure in jars of clay to contrast our fragile earthly lives with the eternal hope within us -- in what areas of your life are you spending more energy trying to repair the clay pot than clinging to the treasure inside?

Stephen knew that speaking the truth before the Sanhedrin would likely cost him his life, yet he remained faithful to the platform God had given him -- what platforms or opportunities has God given you where fear has kept you from speaking boldly for Christ?

1 Corinthians 15 warns that if our hope in Christ is only for this life we are to be pitied -- how much of your daily faith and prayer life is focused on improving your earthly circumstances versus pursuing an eternal perspective?

Stephen's final words were a prayer for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him, mirroring Jesus on the cross -- who in your life is most difficult to forgive, and what does your response to them reveal about how deeply you have received God's forgiveness yourself?

The sermon points out that Jesus appeared to be standing rather than seated as he watched Stephen's faithfulness in suffering -- how does the awareness that Jesus is attentively present in your trials change the way you respond to them?

The religious leaders had built their identity and access to God around the temple and the law, and resisted the new thing God was doing -- are there traditions, routines, or religious structures in your own life that may be functioning as barriers to what the Holy Spirit is doing today?