

“Stephen – A Faithful Witness”

Acts 6:8-7:60

Dr. Jarrett Stephens | October 17, 2021

I’ve got to take a moment at the start of this message and just brag on our church for a second. We’ve been in this series called *FORWARD* and it’s a study in the book of Acts...and it’s all about the early church. How they were seemingly:

- always on the move...
- always advancing the gospel of Christ...
- always pushing ahead – meeting the needs of those inside and outside their community of faith...

And personally, I’ve been loving this study and hopefully it’s been a challenge to all of us. My prayer and goal for us each week is to hear these messages and look at our own lives and look at our church and see if we are in any way resembling the early church as it was getting up and going in Jerusalem.

Certainly they were doing some things and experiencing some things that were unique to the time and culture in which they lived. I mean the apostolic era was just getting started so there were FOR SURE some differences in what they were going through and how they handled some situations.

But I’m talking about the big picture stuff...I’m wondering if we share the same heart as they had:

- Do we long to meet needs like the early church longed to meet needs?
- Are we giving and generous, just like this early church in Jerusalem was giving and generous?
- Are we as bold as these early followers of Jesus were?
- Are we as willing to endure persecution and hardship and difficulty as they were?
- Do we share with them the same passion to fill our city with the teachings of Jesus like they filled Jerusalem?
- Are we fighting for unity and living in community and praying and seeking the Lord like this early church did?

These are the questions I’m asking...and I’m looking at my life wondering am I doing my part in this? I’m looking at our church and asking, “How are we lining up?” “Are we moving FORWARD in these things like this early church was moving forward?”

And this weekend comes and I just want to show you what I experienced just on this weekend.

illus. Weekend Ministry:

- Thursday evening with Klein Forest
- 5th Quarter on Friday night hosted by our student ministry
- CMC
- Champions for Hope
- Pumpkin Patch
- Lighthouse for Students Gala tonight
- Next week: Car Care

Now, this doesn't mean we have arrived and that we're doing everything right! It doesn't mean that we have it all together and don't have our own issues and struggles as a church. What it does point to though is that:

- we're NOT apathetic...
- we're NOT stuck...
- we're NOT anemic...

As a church we are on the move and Champion Forest you can take confidence in the fact that if you are a member of our church or should you join our church, you're not a part of or joining or a stagnant organization but instead you are joining a movement.

Illus. Oct. 31 New Member Class

And the goal is NOT to simply enjoy the ride, but to jump in because you as a member of Champion Forest specifically...and as a member of the body of Christ in general have a part to play.

And that's what I want to show you today as we look at the life and ministry of a man named Stephen.

The title of the sermon is: **Stephen: A Faithful Witness**

We met Stephen last week. If you remember the church had a problem that it was dealing with and it was causing some dissention among the members. Some widows in the church had some needs that were going unmet...they were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

And so, the leaders come together with the entire church...and they work together as we said last week to come up with a solution. And the solution to the problem was pick out seven men that can help serve these widows and Stephen was one of these men.

Now, the first note I want us to make as we get going today is this:

- 1. God uses ordinary people to help accomplish his purposes.**

Stephen was an ordinary man. Recall from last week **Acts 6:2-3** – “**And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.”**”

We don’t know much about Stephen. To our knowledge, he was not an eye-witness to Jesus’ miracles...to his death, resurrection or ascension. He was most likely one of the many men that had trusted in Jesus at Pentecost.

He has a Greek name and so by all accounts was a Hellenist – a Greek-speaking Jew that had adopted the Greek culture and way of life.

Nothing about him stood out EXCEPT...and I want to highlight this:

1. His character

Acts 6:3a – “**Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...**”

Acts 6:5b – “**...and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...**”

Acts 6:8a – “**And Stephen, full of grace and power...**”

Yes, Stephen was just an average, ordinary person...and God uses average, ordinary people. What I’ve observed though, and we see it play out here:

- He REALLY uses average, ordinary people that have character...that have integrity...that who they say they are and their actions line up!
- He REALLY uses ordinary people who are FILLED with, dominated by – the word “full” here...we see it repeatedly used to describe Stephen’s life means “one that is controlled by” the Holy Spirit.
- He REALLY uses people who love wisdom and seek wisdom.

This is the kind of person that God uses in a great way. Amazing what God can do with an individual. He comes to live in a person who is ordinary and when God takes up residence in that person through the Holy Spirit, he makes him extraordinary!

What makes the difference? The Holy Spirit makes the difference!

Leonard Ravenhill – “**The greatest miracle that God can do today is to take an unholy man out of unholy world, and make that man holy and put him back into that unholy world and keep him holy in it.**”

Illus. The Saving Life of Christ – Written by Major Ian Thomas. He was an evangelist from across the pond. He founded the Torchbearer’s Bible Schools. Wrote this book called The Saving Life of Christ.

The book is good, but really Chapter Five is worth the price of the whole book. The Chapter title is “Any Old Bush Will Do”.

And essentially what that chapter communicates is that episode in Moses’ life when he came before the burning bush...it wasn’t the bush that was so special. Nothing about that bush in and of itself was great. What made that bush so special is that God was in the bush!

God uses ordinary people. What makes anything we do extraordinary is when God is in us!

Hear me on this: Stephen was NOT some super saint! He as a man that was saved – that’s where it all starts and then he was totally surrendered to the Holy Spirit of God.

And God was about to use him in a VERY big way. Stephen’s character was intact. Who he was on the inside influenced how he lived on the outside – there was no duplicity! No hypocrisy!

- No saying one thing and doing another...
- No believing one thing and living contradictory...

There was none of that in Stephen’s life. He was a man of “good repute”. He had integrity. He had character.

And apparently he was willing to do whatever was asked of him – no matter how little or how much it may have seemed insignificant at the time (waiting tables and serving widows!)

Just a point of application today: You want to know if you are filled with and dominated by the Holy Spirit of God? You want to know if you have inward character?

Then answer this question internally...it may be a good gauge of just how filled with the Spirit of God you are. How do you respond when asked to fill a seemingly small assignment?

D.L Moody – “There are many of us that are willing to do great things for the Lord; but few of us are willing to do the little things.”

It’s been said and I believe it’s true that if you are too big for a small assignment, then you’re too small for a big assignment.

Some of us want a large assignment from God, but we’re not willing to do a little one that he puts right in front of us. I tell young dads and challenge them sometimes in that some of them want to change the world, but they don’t want to change the dishwasher or the washing machine or the dirty diaper at home.

How do you respond in small assignments?

- Maybe it's an assignment that no one else will notice you doing - it's an assignment that's not going to get your name in the papers!
- Maybe it's an assignment that no one else wants to do and you get called on to do it!
- Maybe it's an assignment that stretches you...gets you out of your comfort zone...takes a little faith.

How do you respond? Do you try to get out of it? Complain while doing it? Tweet it...Instagram it so someone can see it? At least get some "likes" out of it!

Listen: people filled with the Holy Spirit...people who have character, the size of the assignment and recognition is NOT what matters to them. What matters to them is:

- They are faithful...
- They are obedient...
- They represent God in an honorable way...

Stephen was a man the Bible says was:

- full of faith...
- full of grace...
- full of power...

And yet he was willing to do the "little things". He was willing to roll up his sleeves and do the menial tasks. He didn't have to have his name in the headlines.

People full of the Holy Spirit...people with character have no problem SERVING:

- waiting tables...
- meeting the needs of widows...

Here at church, don't be too big to serve wherever needed: our children's ministry...at the CMC...get in the game no matter what position you are asked to play!

Same at home! Serving your wife and children! At the office - serve your employees and co-workers. You may be the leader of your company, your organization, your team...the challenge to you is this: Don't become too big to do small things!

Illus. Brother Lawrence – Practicing the Presence of God – small things! (cook, sandal maker)

Note Stephen's character...an ordinary man, yet dominated by the Holy Spirit. He was a man of wisdom and a good repute. This was a good man, were talking about here. An ordinary man...but a man of character.

1. God uses ordinary people to help accomplish his purposes.

2. God often assigns people difficult tasks to help accomplish his purposes.

Now, we don't know how much time passed between Acts 6:7 and Acts 6:8, but we assume it was a considerable amount. The gospel was bearing fruit. The Church is continuing to advance so much so the Bible tells us (v. 7) that a "great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

God was on the move and in this time Stephen becomes in a great sense, "a force to be reckoned with".

He was previously described in Acts as a man full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit. Here in **Acts 6:8** – "**And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.**"

This is the first time we read of someone that was not an apostle "performing wonders and signs". There was no doubt God's hand was on Stephen and it appears that God had anointed Stephen for a special ministry and gave him a special calling specifically to Greek-speaking Jews...these Hellenists as they were called.

Again, I stress...Stephen was ordinary.

- Special calling – yes!
- Special anointing for ministry – yes!
- Special God he served – yes!

But Stephen...he was an ordinary man God was using to help advance the cause of Christ.

Stephen was living out his calling and it was some in a synagogue in Jerusalem that was called "The synagogue of the Freedmen" didn't like what he was preaching (v. 9).

During the days of the Roman Empire scholars estimate there was some 60 million slaves. Many of those slaves were Jews that had been dispersed in places like North Africa and Asia...places like Greece and Turkey (v. 9a – Cyrene, Alexandria, etc)

It appears in this synagogue...and keep in mind there were a number of small synagogues in and around Jerusalem at the time) part of what made you member at this specific synagogue was you were a "freed slave" or the descendant of a slave – i.e. "Freedmen".

Now, we don't know what the center of the controversy with Stephen was (Luke doesn't fill us in on that detail), but we do know the Freedmen took issue with some of the things Stephen was preaching...they didn't agree with him. And the scripture says that a "dispute" rose up.

Acts 6:10-14 – "**But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. 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**

counsel and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,¹⁴ 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.”

It’s interesting to note the correlations between Jesus and Stephen here. This really doesn’t have anything to do with the sermon, but I do think it’s interesting to highlight. Jesus said, “if the persecute me, they will persecute you...that no servant is greater than his master.” And the servant Stephen is going through and experiencing some of the EXACT things his master went through!

- Both had false accusations that were leveled against them...
- Both had false witnesses testifying against them...
- Both had men secretly plotting against them...
- Both had to answer to the High Priest...

Acts 7:1 – “And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

Now, Stephen is in a tight spot here. When I talk about God assigning his people difficult tasks to help accomplish his purposes, THIS is a difficult task!

Talk about going through what Jesus went through...we identified a lot of the similarities one is BOTH are also accused of blasphemy and the punishment for blasphemy is what? DEATH! Just like Jesus!

You know that saying: “God will never give you more than you can handle?” – It’s false! NOT TRUE! God often will assign his people a difficult task that will:

- Stretch them...
- Bring them to the end of themselves...
- Force dependence upon him...
- Grow faith in him...

This is just how God works! And facing death...facing an angry instigating mob – I call this a difficult task! God is giving Stephen more than he can handle, but the key is he is WITH Stephen through all of this.

The real truth is there is NOTHING God will assign, give or allow that you AND he can’t handle together!

Now, ALL of chapter 7 is Stephen refuting the false accusations leveled against him and he does this by using the Old Testament to prove that Jesus was the Messiah AND that Jesus from the beginning WAS the plan of God for salvation...and he goes all the way back to Abraham to prove it.

We noted the character of Stephen in the first half of this sermon, I want to note in this second section here: **His Conviction**

In trouble...he knows this could end VERY badly. And yet look at what this scripture says as he is being opposed and falsely accused:

Acts 6:15 – “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

They are accusing Stephen of blaspheming Moses (v. 11) and “changing the customs of Moses” (v. 14) and yet Stephen on trial for his life – his face is glowing just like the face of Moses (Ex. 34) after he had been on the mountain of God receiving the 10 Commandments.

So, what is Stephen going to do? How is Stephen going to respond to the High Priest in front of the entire ruling council? Is he going to recant? Is he going to back down? Is he going to soften his message or hold anything back?

Of course not! You know why? Because he was a man of character and he is a man of conviction. And people like this...it's impossible for them to go against what they believe in the deep recesses of their being.

Howard Hendricks, the great Bible prof at DTS said: **“A belief is something you will argue about. A conviction is something you will die for.”**

Stephen had conviction. And he could remain a faithful witness in a very difficult time because of it.

You read Acts 7 and you see a man that is committed to standing by and speaking up for his convictions. We don't have time to read his entire defense, but it's essentially a retelling of Israel's history from the time of Abraham to Joseph to Moses and he highlights throughout Israel's history, their stubborn refusal to follow God time and again.

It culminates with Stephen who was being accused of blasphemy flip it and lay an accusation upon them...and He accuses the ruling counsel and all listening to him of rejecting Jesus, God's Messiah!

Acts 7:51-53 – “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² 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, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

THAT is conviction! Standing for what you believe and speaking to what you believe even if it costs you! Talk about being a faithful witness!

Listen to me: God often assigns his people difficult tasks to help accomplish his purposes and scripture and history is replete with examples of this!

- Abraham – sacrifice your son!
- Moses – go before Pharaoh!
- Noah – build a boat!
- Daniel – keep praying when you’re commanded not to!
- Mary – a young, teenager give birth to the Messiah!
- Peter and John – stand and testify before the Sanhedrin!
- Stephen – give a defense of Christ to the High Priest!

If you’ve been assigned a difficult task as a believer – Come on in, the water is warm! God assigns his people difficult tasks to help accomplish his purposes!

And the difficulty will reveal whether or not you are a person of character and conviction...because it’s in the difficult times where character is revealed and where conviction is solidified.

And let me just say this while I’m in the area. People like Stephen who have character and that stand by their convictions – CHANGE the world.

Illus. Martin Luther – One example. Oct. 31 is coming up! Yes, it’s Halloween, but it’s also Reformation Day. It’s the day in 1517 the German monk, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenburg Castle Church challenging the Catholic church’s authority and their sales of indulgences.

In 1521, Luther was summoned to stand before authorities and Johann von Eck, an archbishop speaking on behalf of the Emperor of Rome demands that Luther recant for writing about the abuses and heresy of the Catholic Church.

Do you remember what this man of character who stood by his convictions said?

Martin Luther - “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

He sparked the Protestant Reformation...changed the world! God assigned him a difficult task to help accomplish his purposes.

And that difficulty revealed his character...his convictions. Luther, Stephen and so many others remained true and were faithful witnesses for Jesus.

1. God uses ordinary people to help accomplish his purposes.
2. God often assigns people difficult tasks to help accomplish his purposes.
3. **God rewards people for their faithfulness and obedience in helping accomplish his purposes.**

We noted: Stephen's character. We noted his convictions. In this final section of the sermon let's look at: **His Courage**

Stephen preaches this message...stands by his convictions...and let's just say it doesn't go over that well!

Acts 7:54 – “**Now when they heard these things they were enraged** (some of your Bible say, “they were cut to the heart”), **and they ground their teeth at him.**”

It's a picture of a pack of hungry wolves. Stephen a man of character and conviction, preaches AND it brings about conviction! And they people don't like it!

Now, that hasn't changed has it?! NONE of us LIKE being convicted. Conviction doesn't sit well with us in our self-help, selfie-loving world.

It's natural for us to bristle at whatever it is that convicts us. We WANT to feel good about ourselves – ALL the time! It's like the creed of our day! We'll avoid feeling bad about ourselves at all costs!

- This is why for some, our time alone with the Lord can sometimes be anemic – because being in his holy presence shines a bright light on our impurities and we don't like it!
- It's why we are quick to move on and start doing something else when we see something that is unjust or wrong – that way we don't have to think about what part we need to play in making it right!
- It's why we don't open ourselves up to accountability and allow people to speak the truth in love to us...we don't want to hear what they have to say if it's correctional in nature!
- It's why some will leave Church and refuse to come back or another church will be sought out because we don't want a message offending us...stepping on our toes!

Listen, it is natural to NOT like conviction. But, let's remember today, WHO brings about conviction! The Holy Spirit!

John 16:8 – “**And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.**”

To resist conviction is to resist the Holy Spirit. Stephen knew this, that's why he said in (v. 51) “you always resist the Holy Spirit”.

Listen to me...if you want to grow in your faith, learn to appreciate what I call the “sweet conviction” of God. Conviction is different than condemnation.

Satan loves to condemn. The Spirit of God loves to convict! There is a difference! Satan accuses. He always brings guilt and shame – that’s condemnation.

The Holy Spirit comes alongside. He always brings forth a desire to be more like God and helps you in getting there!

Don’t resist conviction. To do so is to resist God himself. These people didn’t want to hear it any longer! And in anger, they begin yelling and screaming at Stephen to shut up.

Acts 7:55-56 – “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. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Jesus is standing...two times it’s mentioned here, so it’s important! Usually the scripture says he is seated at the right hand of God...here he is standing!

What do you do when someone comes in the room that you are pleased to see? You stand! Jesus is standing in approval and affirmation of what Stephen is doing.

I thought about titling this sermon: Tragedy or Triumph. Because we could read this text and see what happens to Stephen in just a moment and think, “that’s a tragedy.” But, is it? Isn’t it really a triumph...a victory?!

Stephen is getting ready to get his reward! He’s been a faithful witness. He has had the courage not to shrink back...not to back down...and God rewards him in this moment, giving him a glimpse of heaven.

- Jesus is standing in affirmation!
- Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen home!

Acts 7:57-60 – “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.⁵⁸ 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. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (sounds a lot like Jesus doesn’t it? People filled with the Spirit do! It’s one of the major ways you know someone is filled with the Spirit. They sound their Savior!) ⁶⁰ 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.”

Stephen is the very first martyr we have in the church! Just an ordinary man who was assigned a difficult task. And he was rewarded for his faithfulness and obedience in helping the Lord accomplish his purposes.

What could possibly be the divine purpose of this? Well, we’ll look at it next week, but it is this event that led to the spread of the gospel.

Acts 8:1b– “...And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

This event propelled the advance of the gospel to the entire world.

Stephen was a faithful witness! And his reward? Oh, it wasn't physical life...his obedience actually cost him his life. It wasn't material goods, that will rot and waste away and he couldn't take those into eternity with him any way...those weren't his rewards!

That's often what we think the reward is, right? No conflict. Peace at every turn and on every side. Physical blessing. Physical wealth.

Those things are great and sometimes they do come with obedience and faithfulness. But the reward we are after is not any of these things...it's him! He is our reward.

Remember this the next time God calls you to a difficult task. Be like Stephen. Be a man of character...conviction...courage. You do this and you can take confidence that when you are faithful and obedient to help accomplish his purposes, God WILL reward you with the greatest of all prizes – Himself.

Would you pray with me?

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