

Needed: Superheroes

January 17, 2020

Scripture: Acts 6:8-7:60
(Series: Reimagining Church; Message 17)

Review (Slide)

August – focused on prayer and waiting...

September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November – focused on the Church's mission

This month – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

Scripture Reading: Only reading parts of this text

(Be encouraged to read the rest in your devotions throughout the week)

6⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from 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—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7 ¹ Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But 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. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged 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.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Messages

Today, the term “hero” has lost most of its meaning.

There are Marvel superhero's - Superman, Batman, Spiderman - all with super-human abilities they use to save mankind. They're cool - except they're not real. A few years ago there was the TV series, “*Heroes*”; and then the sequel “*Hero's Reborn*” on NBC - again, not real; just actors playing parts.

We've do have some real-life hero's (or at least, so we thought). We've had political hero's like Douglas McArthur - a major WW2 hero. He was terminated for his (poor) leadership in the Korean War. There was General Petrous with the gulf war; he was relieved of duty for sharing secrets with his mistress.

We've had Sports heroes. Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle turned out to be alcoholics; Sosa and McGuire and a host of others took steroids; Pete Rose bet on games.

There have been business moguls, Hollywood Stars, influential politicians who have had affairs, molested co-workers and interns, embezzled, lied... The “hero” in many people fails to stand up under scrutiny.

Yet, there are some real hero's...

I think of Firefighters who run into burning buildings as everyone else runs out; police officers who serve and protect often at the cost of their own life.

The Coast Guard reminds its' guardsmen “*you have to go out - you don't have to come back.*” In our military there are the Berets, Seals, Rangers, Raiders, and Special Ops.

In this pandemic, the doctors and nurses and aids who work with covid19 patients day in and day out, the scientists who discovered the vaccines, and essential works on the front lines are all heroes in my book.

There are missionaries who have left family, friends and comforts of home for the Gospel risking their lives as well as people who have stepped up and serve, humbly and sacrificially in the Church. Fox's Book of Martyrs tells the stories of many who sacrificed their life rather than capitulate to pressure, desert the mission, or disobey or deny Jesus.

These are all regular people - real people - on an extraordinary mission who see the big picture and are literally, willing to lay down their life for it. Thousands of people do every year. We owe them our gratitude.

Stephen - who we introduced last week - laid down his life for Christ, for the mission of Christ's Church. He was the Church's first martyr.

Stephen was not an Apostle. He was just a (lay)person - an **ordinary person** like you and me. But he had an **extraordinary** faith. When God called him to be a leader, he said "Yes!" That makes him a "hero."

Stephen had a servant's heart, a selfless spirit and had already - even as a young Christian - sold out (i.e., all-in); he had spiritually died to Christ. Stephen had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament like most Jews did, but it was his spirit-empowered faith that set him apart.

His **spirit-empowered** faith gave him an **extraordinary** commitment (vision, mission) he was willing to die for. He was called to die physically for Jesus. And he did.

The early Church gradually distinguished themselves from their Jewish heritage. For a time, the Christians continued to attend the Temple services, keep Torah, and do things as they had always done them before.

But Stephen was in the temple daily challenging the status quo, the comfortable, the traditionalists.

He insisted the Temple structure (i.e., the way they were doing things) was an impediment to the Church's growth, and that Messiah's coming had radically changed the way Torah should be kept. There comes a time, Stephen suggested, when Truth and tradition must part ways; it's never simple, it's never easy, but Stephen knew it was absolutely necessary.

Stephen was an ordinary person. But he was one of the early Church's super-heroes. If God can use Stephen; he can use you and me.

Let's look at his dramatic story:

FIRST SCENE

Scene One begins in a Courtroom; Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin. Stephen's comments brought a swift response from the religious authorities.

Stephen was seized and charged with **blaspheming God** (speaking against the Temple and the Torah - the heart of Judaism - was the equivalent of blaspheming God). He was brought before the Sanhedrin

As Moses once stood before the people of God "*with his face shining*" because he had been talking with God" (**Exodus 34:29**), "*all who sat in the council saw [Stephen's] face was like the face of an angel*" (**6:15**).

With all the drama of a John Grisham novel - an innocent man on trial for his life, facing a rigged jury on trumped up charges with bribed witnesses - this is a story you know it isn't going to end well.

The chief prosecutor initiates the interrogation: "*Are these charge's true?*" Stephen's life hangs in the balance; his answer will determine his future, live or die.

How would you answer? If you found yourself on trial for being a follower of Jesus, and your response means life or death - how would answer? Are you...or are you not?

In the past, it was an unlikely scenario - having to defend our relationship with Jesus and having our life depend on our response . . . but that is rapidly changing in our post-Christian world. People are increasingly losing their "life" (livelihood) simply by standing up for Jesus and Biblical principles.

SECOND SCENE

Scene Two is Stephen's Speech. This is the longest speech in the book of Acts (longer than Paul's three longest sermons combined).

Stephens speech follows a (literary) pattern borrowed from OT passages like we find in **Psalms 105:12-43 and 106:6-42; Joshua 24:2-13; and Nehemiah 9:7-31.**

These are all stories of how God hears the cries of his people in their time of affliction - even though they (themselves) provoked God's wrath. These are all stories of how God, when they repented, sent his mercy.

Stephen's speech follows the pattern of these pleas with one significant difference. He underscores the **rebelliousness** of God's people against their deliverer.

--"*You are the brothers who hated Joseph - who turned out to be your deliverer . . .*"

- “You rejected Moses who God himself raised up to lead them out of Egypt”
- “You perpetrated persecution and murder against God’s prophets,” and . . .
- “You murdered the Prophet who came to provide your ultimate salvation.”

Stephen concludes by saying they are a “*stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit.*” Translation: “You’re no better than your **forefathers**” (cf. 7:51-52) (Ouch!)

This is the illustration in Dale Carnegie’s “*How to Win Friends and Influence People*” of how not to beg for your life when under indictment

Listen to the charges. Understand Stephen’s responses...

Charge One: You have **blasphemed** against the Torah (first five Bible books written by Moses); you said “*Jesus of Nazareth will change the customs which Moses delivered to us*” (6:14).

The story of God’s people from Abraham to Jesus is kept in motion by God’s promises and his initial fulfillment of those promises. It’s a history that remains open to an as yet unfulfilled future. Israel’s existence has always been provisional/preliminary to what is to come.

Stephen’s answer: “*You sin against your own history when you entrench yourself and say the **Torah** is God’s **only** and final **Word***”

Moses was just one more step in God ultimately fulfilling all his promises. Moses himself talked of a great prophet: “*God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up*” (7:37).

Stephen’s answer: “*Embracing **Jesus** as that prophet isn’t disloyalty; embracing Jesus is actually embracing the **Mosaic** tradition*”

Charge Two: “*You have spoken **blaspheme** against the **Temple**; you said ‘Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [temple]’” (6:14)*

Stephen diminished the role of the Temple by reminding the leaders that all God’s great theophanies/revelations/epiphanies took place in foreign places - Ur, Sinai, Midian - even after the Temple was built.

Stephen’s answer: “*God expressly ordered the ‘**Tent** of Witness’ (7:44), but [God did] not [order] the **Temple** [to be built].*”

Stephen’s answer: “*If you insist on stopping with Moses (**Torah**) then logically you have to stop with the ‘**Tent** of Witness’ prescribed in Torah*” (Don’t you just hate it when people turn your own argument against you?!)

Stephen points out the first person to think about a permanent, immovable place of worship was David (not Moses). David’s son actually built it and it wasn’t by divine command. In fact, God acquiesced according to Isaiah - “*Yet the most high does not dwell in houses made with hands*” (Isaiah 66:1-2).

Stephen takes his opponents strength - their knowledge of the Bible - and uses it to prove Jesus is the promised Messiah. Most of them knew the Scripture by heart; Stephen is actually suggesting they do more than simply read it; he's suggest they actually listen to and do what it says.

How many "Christians" do you know who are Christians in name only? That is, they may attend church - even regularly - but they don't do the Word of God (It's not knowing God's Word that makes us Christians - even Satan knows God's Word; it's doing the Word of God that makes us followers of Jesus!")

Stephen is saying that all of Scripture clearly points beyond the Torah and the Temple to Jesus. **7:54** - "*When they heard this they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.*"

SCENE THREE:

This story appears to be a classic tragedy: an innocent man dies falsely accused. The mob is angry. Blasphemy! (It's an incendiary word - a hot button - because no one is in favor of blasphemy!). So Stephen is dragged, according to custom, outside the city walls and stoned to death; it is a very painful, cruel way to die.

Luke records that through all of this Stephen prayed . . .

This would be a real **tragedy except for one little **phrase**: "*I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*"**

A young prodigy gave his first piano recital. He received a standing ovation. But he walked off the stage sad and discouraged. "Why?" he was asked. "Everyone was standing." "Yes," he said, "all but one; everyone but my teacher."

Stephen sees Jesus standing! (Everywhere else in Scripture Jesus is **seated** at God's right hand; when Jesus taught, Scripture says he **sat** down - Rabbi's still do).

But now the **teaching** is over. Stephen has **completed** his "**recital**." And Jesus stands. (It gives me goose bumps; brings tears to my eyes. Jesus is standing!)

Stephen has been faithful. He gave his whole heart to Jesus; now he gives his life as well. And Jesus **stands**! Imagine a standing ovation from your teacher. Now imagine your teacher (your rabbi) is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (I believe Jesus stands in the presence of heroic faith)!

If you were arrested, if you were brought to trial for following Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you? When **your recital** (life) is over,

will Jesus, be **standing**? When it's your time to "graduate" will your rabbi be on his feet saying, "Well done!"

SCENE FOUR: THE EPITAPH

At some point in his life, Stephen made two **courageous decisions (choices).**

His first decision was to become a **disciple** of Jesus Christ; have you made that decision yet?

Stephen decided to become a follower of the Way, to join the new movement, to go all-in; have **you** made that decision yet?

Stephen decided to become a student of God's Word; he decided to be a person of prayer; have you made that decision yet.

Too many leaders in the church today don't know the Scriptures, spend little time in prayer, and don't earnestly seek God's Will. They buckle under the (peer) pressure, default to human wisdom, make hasty and short-sighted decisions, and quickly grow weary in their service. Today the Church in North America has lost its influence, power, vision and mission.

His second decision was to allow God to **use him** and the gifts he was entrusted with anyway God wanted - even martyrdom. Have **you** made that decision yet?

When asked to step into leadership, he embraced it; he didn't seek it, but when called, he responded to the invitation as if it was God's call - because it was. (I know I'm old, but growing up, to be asked to serve the Church was considered an honor, an invitation rarely declined; today most members prefer to be excused...)

When the Church has called on you, have you embraced your calling or made excuses? Heroes never make excuses; they don't need to. They are stepping in and stepping up. Are you using the gifts God has entrusted to you to build his church and his kingdom?

Saying "yes" to God's Spirit cost Stephen his **life. But then, Stephen understood it never was his **life** anyway; and he understood it was this **life** - not real Life.**

God had given it to him. He had given it back to **God**. He belonged to his faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

God used him as God wanted. Stephen became the first martyr of many. Martyrdom for Christ has been repeated millions of times since Stephen. Martyrdom is not just a first century phenomena; it has been occurring

steadily since the first century (In fact, more Christ followers were martyred in the 20th century than in the first nineteen combined!).

The call to Jesus is the call to **die** for him - **if necessary**, if God asks. It's a commitment requiring we take up our **cross** and **follow** him (**Luke 9:23**). In fact, Jesus said if you're **not willing** to take up your cross, you **can't** be my disciple. It is that simple.

If you plan to live for Jesus; you need to be willing to die for Jesus. That is Jesus' call to every ordinary follower: Live for Christ. Die to self . . . and maybe in this world as well. If we're **willing** to die for him, you will certainly be **willing** to **live** for him.

Remember Todd Beamer. He was on United Flight 93 that went down on 9-11. He talked with an operator by phone, they prayed the Lord's Prayer together, and then she heard him say, "*Lord Jesus, help me. Let's roll*" as Todd and a few others on the plane tried to stop the hijackers...

Todd was a disciple of Jesus. Lisa Beamer writes in "Let's Roll" that at 24 years of age, Todd had already written out his life goals: "*To be a strong Christian. To know direction. To be disciplined. To be a father with integrity. To love my wife and support her efforts. To strive to be like my father. To be respected, even when I'm not around. To be compassionate to others and support them through time and money.*"

Todd attended church regularly, led a small couples' group with his wife, taught a weekly boy's group. He was an ordinary disciple of Jesus...until God called him to exercise a heroic faith...and he was ready...

Heroic faith doesn't come instantly - it comes one **day** at a time, one **decision** at a time, one **step** toward Jesus at a time - until it is **time**.

That was Stephen. That was Todd Beamer. Are you ready? The question isn't what do I need to do? The question is who do I need to be!

Real **heroes** don't set out to be **heroes**. Real **Heroes** become heroes when God calls and they're **ready** to **respond** - because they've been practicing their response every day of their life! The Church desperately needs more heroes.

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