

Wisdom, Courage, Conviction, Death

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord our God, we come before you now, remembering Jesus at your right hand, and ask that you would pour your Spirit on us, that we might have wisdom to understand your Word, and to be gripped by your Word, and to stick our necks out for you this coming week.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Have a seat, friends. Well, let me reintroduce you to a friend of mine and of yours. We met Stephen back in August, where he was a deacon.

Earlier in the year when we were preaching through the Book of Acts, we met Stephen who was there to wipe tables and to mop floors, and to distribute food between bickering widows, with the purpose that the apostles of the early church, chosen by Jesus, would be freed for their ministry of the Word and of prayer.

Stephen was part of this group of deacons, and chosen for their godliness, for their good standing, for being full of the Spirit and wisdom. And Stephen was commissioned by the apostles.

They laid hands on him and commissioned him for that work of waiting on tables. Today we meet Stephen again, in the same chapter, chapter 6, but we see his ministry has expanded and intensified.

[1 : 33] We actually don't know how much time has elapsed between the old and new Stephen, because it's sort of bracketed by verse 7 of chapter 6, which is one of Luke's summary quotes about the church.

Verse 7, The Word of God continued to spread. The number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And Luke often gives us these summaries of how the Word of God's going in the early church, and it could have been months or maybe even years between the first half of chapter 6 and the second half.

But when we meet Stephen in the second half, we get to know him better. Verse 8, Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, stood up and argued with him, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke.

[2 : 35] We now see Stephen the debater, the arguer, the one who works signs and wonders, the one who reasons with the power of the spirit for the truth about Jesus Christ, that Jesus is God's risen king, the Messiah.

He probably argued with these Jews about what that meant for the temple and for the land and for the rituals of the law. Stephen is articulate by the spirit.

They could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke. All through the book of Acts, it's a common theme.

One of the main functions of the Holy Spirit is to help God's people speak well for Jesus. So Stephen has this great ministry, which I commend to all of us, of arguing.

It's a great ministry of the argument for the gospel. We could use some more Stephens today, some more winsome, gracious arguers for the gospel.

[3 : 42] Godly arguments are a means for the kingdom of God to spread. I think we've got enough nice, quiet Christians. We don't need any more nice.

We need arguers. We need speakers for the truth about Jesus. And Stephen is the first person in the book of Acts who's a witness who's not an eyewitness.

Up until now, we've had the eyewitness apostles speak about what they've seen and heard. But now we have someone who's not an eyewitness, though interestingly he will become an eyewitness toward the end of the story.

And the people he's arguing with are particularly kind of feral. There are these men of the synagogue of the Libertines or the freed men. They're not from Israel. They are Jews from around other nations of the Roman Empire who have actually sacrificed a lot to come and live in Israel. And yet they're not quite, they've kind of got their own little synagogue. They're not quite accepted by the main, you know, by the traditional Hebrew-speaking Jews. And they're particularly kind of zealous and paranoid for the land which they've come to and for the temple which they've come to. [4 : 58] And they're not able, obviously, they're not able to win the argument against Stephen. And so they try and set him up. This is what happens in verse 11. They secretly instigated some men to say, we have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes. So they're instigating witnesses. They're stirring up. They brought him before the council.

They set up false witnesses who said, this man never stops saying things against the holy place and the law. They are trying as hard as they can to either silence Stephen or get him arrested or something worse.

And the charges that they bring to Stephen are actually the key to understanding this whole event because Stephen's long defence, his long sermon, his long message can only be understood if you understand the charges.

And the charges are these. He never stops saying things against the holy place and the law. We've heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed to us.

[6 : 19] So the charges kind of have two main elements. The first element is they're saying Stephen is anti-temple. He's anti-the holy place and he's therefore anti-the land that the temple stands on.

And the other charge is that he's anti-Moses and he's anti-the law that Moses gave. So he doesn't like temple land and he doesn't like Moses and the law. And if you have those two things in mind when you hear the speech, you'll see how he's defending himself.

The high priest asks him, are these things so? And Stephen replies. And so Stephen is given an opportunity to defend himself. And I think other than being the patron saint of long sermons, Stephen actually shows himself to be a masterful kind of defender of gospel truth.

On the face of it, what he gives is kind of a potted history of Israel. You know, Abraham and Joseph and Moses. But actually, if you look at his speech in light of the charges, what we'll see is that Stephen is not only proving innocence, he is proving the guilt of his accusers, that they do the very thing, the very things that they accuse him of.

He's going to show that they are guilty of being against Moses. They are guilty of being, not understanding the land or the role of the temple. And also what we're going to see in the sermon, which I'm quite excited by, is you actually see him preach Jesus through the patterns of the Old Testament.

[7 : 59] And you're going to see him preaching the life and death and resurrection of Jesus through the Old Testament story. So let's, we cannot do it in fine detail, but let's draw some points from his message.

In chapter 7, 1 to 9, he focuses on Abraham. And he basically makes the point that God's most important dealings with Abraham happened outside the land.

That God had a relationship, a covenant with Abraham that was outside the land and even was quite significant before circumcision. He's implicitly saying the land isn't the be-all and end-all.

You know, the land of Palestine or the land of Canaan isn't the be-all and end-all. That Moses, verse 5, God didn't give him any of it as a heritage. He didn't even see a foot's length of it.

And yet Abraham is the great patriarch who knew God. Abraham knew God through a promise, not through possession of the land. God promised also to Abraham, in verse 6, about Israel's dispossession in Egypt.

[9 : 11] God spoke in these terms that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others who would enslave them and mistreat them.

Stephen makes the point that the identity of God's people has often been resident aliens, as sojourners, as people who are dispossessed and displaced. God's relationship with Abraham predates the land.

So Stephen's in good company. And similarly, Joseph is the same. That's verses 10 to 16, or 9 to 16. Joseph knew God. Joseph served God, not in Canaan, not in Israel's land, but in Egypt. In fact, Joseph rescued God's people, not into the land, but out of the land, into Egypt at the time of the famine. God works to rescue his people outside the land.

And Joseph, I think, Stephen is saying, is a Jesus-like figure. For example, verse 9, The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him and rescued him from all his afflictions and enabled him to win favor and show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh.

[10:31] The pattern of Joseph's life is like the preaching of Jesus' life in Acts. Jesus rejected by his brothers, but God was with him and rescued him from his afflictions.

In the grave. Like Jesus, Joseph is a man with wisdom before rulers. Joseph's role as redeemer of God's people was not recognized by God's people.

Just as Jesus' redemption was not recognized by his people. You know, Joseph was feeding his brothers and they didn't realize who he was. And he rescued his father before his father realized what was going on.

Joseph's rescue to people who do not realize it is like Jesus' rescue of God's people. The third big character he gets to is Moses and he has a long section on Moses.

He wants to make the point he's not anti-Moses. You know, he has the t-shirt, I love Moses. He says, Moses was a beautiful baby. You know, he loves Moses.

[11:39] But makes the point again, in attack, Moses knew God outside the land. He met God in the desert on holy ground in front of the non-burning, burning bush in the desert.

Moses did signs and wonders not in the land but in Egypt. Moses met God not in the land but on Sinai. Moses led a church that was in the wilderness.

Verse 38. He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness. The gift of the land isn't as big as the first century zealous Jew believed.

And Moses, like Joseph, is a Jesus-like figure. See the gospel in Moses' life. Moses is abandoned by his own people. Verse 21.

Yes, by the command of Pharaoh but Stephen paints it as he was abandoned by his own people. And more clearly in verse 24, he tried to be a rescuer of his own people by rescuing a fellow Israelite being oppressed by an Egyptian.

[12:50] He supposed, verse 25, that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them but they did not understand. Just like Jesus.

You would suppose that God's people would have understood that God through Jesus was rescuing them but they did not understand. Like Jesus, Moses is rejected and has a wilderness experience, does signs and wonders as Jesus did signs and wonders and leads his people out as saviour.

Verse 35. It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, who made you a ruler and a judge? That's actually quoted twice by Stephen earlier in, I think, verse 27.

What Stephen's alluding to is that Moses is like Jesus or Jesus is like Moses, the rejected redeemer, the rejected saviour, the one whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

God's people rejected Moses just as they rejected Jesus. Jesus. Stephen reminds them of Moses' promise of a new prophet like him.

[14:08] Verse 37. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up. And the question is, well, what kind of, in what kind of way is Jesus like Moses?

We normally would say, Jesus like Moses because Jesus was the prophet, was the son of God, the word of God. And Moses was like the great prophet and Jesus is the great prophet. But actually, that's not the parallel that Stephen's trying to draw.

This is the parallel he's trying to draw. Remember the golden calf. What happened with the golden calf? The people said in verse 39, they were unwilling to obey Moses.

Instead, they pushed him aside. How is Moses like Jesus? Because they were both pushed aside. Make gods for us who will lead the way for us.

For this Moses who led us out from the land, we do not know what has happened to him. We would say the golden calf was a rejection of God when they worshipped the golden calf.

[15 : 13] But Stephen makes not that point, but the point is they rejected God's mouthpiece. They rejected God's saviour, Moses. And Moses said, the prophet will be like me.

That is, rejected like me. Moses is the rejected servant of God and Jesus is in that same pattern. In fact, the whole wilderness period, Stephen quotes from the book of Amos, the whole 40 years they worshipped idols.

In the tent of Moloch and the star of your God Rephan, these were the images they worshipped and God had promised even at that point through Amos we read that he would send his people into exile, out of the land.

that he would reject his people from the land. And I guess in a sense in the first century God's people are in the land but they're still rejected by God, they're still in exile.

Stephen goes on and finishes with a little bit about the temple. Is he anti-temple? Well he reminds them that the temple was originally a tent and the tent was movable and there was no sense of this locked into this building in this one place where God was somehow meant to be bound to a building.

[16 : 33] The temple was movable and even when Solomon built it the prophet Isaiah made it clear that God cannot be bound. Verse 49 Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me says the Lord? Did not my hand make all these things? So even within the old covenant God was never meant to be bound to this building.

Heaven is his throne earth is his footstool and we'll get a look at that throne in a minute. So Stephen has built a very long defence of an implicit attack.

He's been very wise and shrewd about it but he's shown the pattern of Jesus in the experience of God's people in the Old Testament. He's shown that God's people have always had a relationship with God that was more important than the land or more important than a temple.

And he's even shown I think that God's people have a history of idolatry of rejecting God's leaders and saviors of rejecting God's signs and wonders and it's been an implicit argument but now in 51 he's going to become explicit and fierce.

[17 : 52] you stiff necked people uncircumcised in hearts and ears you stiff necked people that was God's common judgment on his people that they were so stubborn and stiff necked uncircumcised in hearts and ears just as Moses commanded the people circumcise your hearts that you don't have cold hearts to God it was never meant to be about the mere physical circumcision you are forever Stephen says you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors used to do Stephen has made that case and now he concludes that case which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute they killed those who foretold the coming of the righteous one so your ancestors killed the prophets who predicted the Messiah and now you have become the Messiah's betrayers and murderers not only have you killed the prophets you've now killed the one they prophesied you are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels yet you have not kept it you are the breakers of the law they accused him of being anti law he's shown they are they have broken the law they're anti law they accused him of being anti

God's presence he has shown that they are anti God by their idolatry of the temple building they accused him of being anti Moses he has shown that they are in the line of those who have always resisted Moses resisted God through resisting God's mouthpieces and God's word Stephen has mounted an argument that unmasks his opponents Stephen is the defendant in that council but they are the ones who are really on trial in God's court and their response is not good when they heard these things 54 they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen earlier in Acts they were the same emotion with Peter they were enraged at Peter in chapter 5 I think it was and they wanted to get Peter the apostle and at that time

Gamaliel the Jewish leader managed to calm things down but today there's no Gamaliel there's no one here like that unless Stephen backs away he's going to get hurt but he doesn't back away in fact things become even more explicit 55 but filled with the Holy Spirit he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Lord Jesus himself who we know is the driving force in the book of Acts between behind the witness of God's people it is the acts of the risen Jesus now he makes a front stage cameo to the story of Acts and why does Jesus appear is it to rescue Stephen no is it to interrupt his speech no

Jesus appears so Stephen can conclude his speech with power and he concludes 56 look he's addressing the Jews around him look I see the heavens opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of God he summons those around him to see what he sees to acknowledge that Jesus is

the risen Lord and he says I see the son of man standing now everywhere else in the book of Acts this is a bit of a puzzle everywhere else in the book of Acts Jesus is seated at the right hand of God but only here we have Jesus standing at the right hand of God now there's a few different theories about why that is I think it's quite obvious I think the point is the whole while that Stephen has been standing testifying to his Lord that Jesus has been standing as a witness defending Stephen to the father Jesus is vindicating his servant in a heavenly court while he's being condemned in the earthly court Stephen is confessing Christ before men Christ is confessing Stephen before God the father this corrupt earthly court is a shadow of the reality of this true heavenly court where Jesus the advocate stands for his persecuted people and I think God in his wisdom knew what would happen next that it would be the trigger to Stephen's death because we know from Jesus own trial what was it that got Jesus killed in his trial it was when he said you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the mighty one coming on the clouds of heaven that was the end of

[23 : 19] Jesus trial that was the blasphemy that got him killed and so the doctrine of the truth about Jesus at God's right hand got Jesus killed it's about to get Stephen killed and friends it will get us in trouble too if we are faithful to it the group they cover their ears with a loud shout they rush together with him and like Jesus Stephen doesn't fight back they dragged him out of the city began to stone him the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul we'll hear more about him later in Acts while they were stoning Stephen he prayed and this is so Christ Jesus received my spirit then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice Lord do not hold this sin against them when he had said this he died

Jesus dies the same way that Stephen dies the same way as his Lord Jesus saying the same things as Jesus prayed on the cross although there's one important difference where on the cross Jesus prayed to God the father receive my spirit or have mercy Stephen prays to Jesus who he knows is in the presence of the father Stephen is the first Christian martyr in a glorious line of thousands that the Bible calls blessed blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on says the book of revelation how many thousands of dying Christians would have held on to this story as they gave their life for Jesus in the early church we know that Luke loves Stephen he devotes so much space to Stephen let me give you three areas in which I think the account of Stephen is a challenge to us three applications firstly

I think Stephen's a very challenging model of our need to have Christian wisdom and courage he's a great example of arguing courageously for the truth of the gospel of having wise conviction about the truth of the lordship of Jesus if you compare Stephen's wisdom to our Christian wisdom our kind of middle class Christian wisdom I think our wisdom is mostly about being skilled in self protection and self advancement Stephen's wisdom is unwavering faithfulness to the point of death our wisdom is a kind of implicit prosperity gospel that God's loving plan for our lives is comfort Stephen's wisdom is exercised in standing for gospel truth to the point of bloodshed Stephen's wisdom fears

God our wisdom fears other people our wimpy wisdom prejudices all our relationships and we say stupid things like I shouldn't talk to that person about Jesus yet because they're not ready I don't want to make them uncomfortable I don't want to put them off we prejudge the opportunities that Jesus gives us Stephen's wisdom takes a stand and speaks even when he knows people don't want to hear so he's a model of courage secondly he's a great model of Christian wisdom and a kind of intellectual engagement Stephen is a model of intelligence grace biblical understanding and insight used to publicly defend the gospel he knows the Bible so well and yet he knows his culture well he knows what are the idols of his culture and where they fall under the gospel he is a deacon a model of servant leadership yet also he's a model of a whole intellect gripped by the lordship of Jesus his job was to serve tables but he has this spirit led intent to argue with power the significance of Jesus in the public square he's both kind of winsome and favorable and likeable and innocent and yet he's a truth warrior he's uncompromising in arguing for the truth of the gospel he's not nice he's winsome and a truth warrior so he's a model of intellectual engagement and thirdly friends I think he's a model of trusting Jesus his martyrdom is the encouragement that even when human justice fails us there is a heavenly court where we have an advocate our lord Jesus who we confess who speaks for us according to his own speech

[28 : 45] God's people have always been sojourners have always been refugees have always been resident aliens our home will never be in this place our home is there before the throne of the

father where the lord jesus sits at his right hand we will be received as stephen was to that place so it's an encouragement friends I think to stick your neck out for Jesus and to trust that he really is Lord I think there is a thinking jesus is in a land far far away and thinking that he is actually present as lord at god's right hand ruling every part of the earth every part of our lives that should give us a courage to stick our neck out and trust him stephen says look look I see heavens opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of god what stephen saw in a vision friends we see as well we see it through the words of scripture we see it in the preaching of the gospel friends will you join with me will you join with stephen in saying to the world look will you join with me in summoning the whole world to look at the risen jesus lord jesus we you are here with us by your spirit and you are seated ruling over us at god's right hand we pray that we might imitate your servant stephen in his wisdom in his courage in his public confidence and understanding of the bible and of the gospel and of the idols that he cut down in the name of gospel truth lord jesus help us to trust you help us to not respond to injustice with the same help us to as you commanded turn the other cheek that is to take a non violent stand for gospel truth and to speak up and argue for your lordship in every sphere of life and we pray lord jesus that you would take care of us as we do this as a church amen