



[ 3 : 43 ] This is God's word. Pray with me and for me as we ask God to talk to us tonight through his word. So, Lord, that is our prayer. As we come now to the scripture, we pray that you would speak to us.

Lord, that you would encourage us that we would be truly encouraged by this life that's put before us in Stephen. A man full of grace, full of the Holy Spirit, who is not ashamed of the gospel. I pray, Lord, that you would use his testimony, the testimony of his life this evening, to encourage us as we live on mission for you.

May we have the same kind of courage that Stephen had. I pray this in Jesus' name. And God's people said, Amen. You can be seated.

Well, this past week, my daughter and I visited the tomb of Mary. Not Mary in the Bible, but actually another important Mary, at least in church history.

[ 4 : 51 ] Actually, the first Queen of England, Mary. In fact, this queen got the nickname Bloody Mary. Not the drink, the queen, okay? And we visited her tomb there in Westminster Abbey, there in London.

And as we were visiting this tomb, I was reminded, as many of you know, I'm a student of church history. I've studied church history for many years. And as I stood there at the tomb of Mary, I started thinking about how many martyrs, some 300 plus martyrs that were killed for their faith during the five-year reign of Queen Mary.

The first of those martyrs, the first of the Marian martyrs, if you will, was a man by the name of John Rogers. Now, John Rogers was actually a Catholic priest, but he, like many of the English reformers, began to question a lot of the customs and practices and doctrines of the Catholic Church.

And he began to realize that it was something he couldn't believe in anymore, and he resigned his position as priest. Rogers will go on to become a good friend of a name some of you will recognize, a man by the name of William Tyndale, Tyndale Publishing.

William Tyndale gave his life to the English translation of the Bible. In fact, when Tyndale died, Rogers made sure that his translation, which had had a tremendous impact in his own life, remained in print.

[ 6 : 25 ] So, Rogers, again, this first martyr under Queen Mary, the following that I'm going to read is from a book from J.C. Ryle, who describes John Rogers' execution.

He writes the following, On the morning of his martyrdom, John Rogers was awakened in his cell and hardly allowed time to dress himself.

He was then led in the side of the church where he had preached and through the streets where he had pastored. By the wayside stood his wife and ten children, one of which was a baby, who were not permitted to see him in prison.

Rogers saw them, but was not allowed to stop and speak to them. And as he walked to his death, he kept repeating the 51st Psalm.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.

[ 7 : 31 ] An immense crowd lined the street and filled every available spot in Smithfield. Up to that day, men could not tell how the English reformers would respond to the face of death.

But when they saw John Rogers, the first martyr under Queen Mary, walking steadily and unflinchingly into a fiery grave, the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds.

They responded with thundering applause. A French ambassador wrote a description of the scene, quote, Rogers went to his death as if he was walking to his wedding.

Close quote. I want you to think about that last phrase. Rogers went to his death as if he was walking to his wedding.

Faith family, have you ever been amazed at someone's courage? Have you ever known anybody that was courageous, that lived with a sense of boldness and courage?

[ 8 : 51 ] They had courage to stand in the face of persecution, to stand firm in the midst of opposition, to even stand firm in the face of death. Maybe for you, think about examples.

Maybe for some of you, you know somebody that was courageous as they faced their battle with cancer. And they showed enormous courage in that. Maybe for you, it was somebody that was repeatedly kicked to the ground by life.

And yet they had the courage to always keep getting up. Maybe you know somebody that's had the courage to stand against the cultural norms and not go along with what's popular.

Maybe you know somebody that's had the courage to stand in the flames of persecution and not compromise their convictions. Maybe you know somebody that's had the courage to face death with the courage of the gospel.

Courage. Do you have it? Are you a courageous person? And the reason why I ask you that is because courage is not just something the church has had to have throughout history.

[10:01] It's something that's on full display in the early church. As you read the book of Acts, you are shown glimpses of men and women that had the courage to stay focused on the mission even in the face of opposition and persecution.

And no greater example than the one Luke puts before us here in Acts 6 and 7, the man named Stephen. The first Christian martyr, at least the first one recorded in the book of Acts.

And Stephen, Luke tells us, is a man of faith, a man full of the Holy Spirit. And he displays some enormous courage in his life in these verses.

I would give you three ways, there may be more in the text, but at least three ways that Stephen displays courage. First, he displays courage in his willingness to stand on his convictions.

As you're going to see, the entire context of this passage is that the Jewish leaders are upset with what Stephen is saying, along with what many of the other Christians are saying at this time.

[11:10] And Stephen is unwilling to compromise the truth. He is courageous in that he won't compromise what he knows to be true about the gospel.

Second, is he displays courage to forgive his enemies. If you know anything about Stephen, you probably know that as he's literally dying, the last words that come from his mouth, this is chapter 7, verse 60, He is Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Faith family, it takes more courage to forgive than it does to want revenge. Amen? And Stephen, he's so courageous in his willingness to forgive his enemies.

Here's a third way we see courage in Stephen's life, is he has the courage to be killed for his faith.

Again, that's what Stephen's known for here. As you know the story, he's going to be stoned, which is one of the most brutal ways that you can die.

It sometimes could take up to two hours of being pelted with not little bitty rocks, we're talking big stones that are crushing the body and ripping flesh from the bone.

[12:31] And Stephen, in all of that being hit with stones, refuses to deny his faith. He's a courageous man.

So the question that I have for us tonight is this, how do I get what Stephen's got? Amen? I want that courage. I want to be, I know this is not what would Stephen do, right?

That kind of a thing. But Stephen is giving for us a testimony to model. And I want to have the kind of courage that Stephen had to not compromise the truth, to stand on the gospel, to be able to forgive enemies, to be willing, if it were asked of me, to be willing to give my life for the sake of the gospel.

Did Jesus not do that for us? So what does Stephen have? He has courage. And how do we get it?

And I think there's at least three things that we'll see in this text that would give us the kind of courage that Stephen has.

And if you've been around my preaching and teaching for a while, these three things are not going to be new, but these are things I hope we will truly believe. I found myself in studying this passage saying, I want to build my life on that reality, that I would be courageous for the cause and mission of Christ.

[13:57] So here we go. Number one, in Christ, this is what Stephen believed that I believe gave him the courage to live boldly for the mission, is that in Christ, he believed that nothing can separate you from the presence of God.

That in Christ, there is absolutely nothing that will ever happen to you in this life that will separate you from Jesus.

Nothing. Now let me show you that. Here in Acts 6, here's the context. Stephen's in hot water with the Jews. That was very common in the early church because you need to keep in mind that many of these early Christians are Jewish converts.

They're coming out of Judaism. And so that is why many of the Jews and certainly the Jewish leaders are very upset with this Christian movement. They want to shut it down and they are very

bothered that so many people are converting to this Christian faith.

And not only are there conversions happening, but there's teachings that are circulating that Jesus taught the apostles and now the apostles are teaching others like Stephen and they're proclaiming this in the streets and they're sharing this with people and it's getting to the ears of the Jewish leaders and they do not like what's being said.

[15:16] Look at chapter 6, verse 12. And they stirred up the people and the elders of the scribes and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place, that is the temple, and the law, that is the law of Moses.

For we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses delivered to us. So one of the things that was being circulated in terms of Christian teaching is that the temple is no longer necessary.

And as you can imagine, when that reaches the ears of the Jews and certainly the Jewish leaders, they have a real big problem with that.

Why would speaking negatively or at least being perceived to speak negatively about the temple be something that upsets the Jews? It's because their entire system focused on the temple.

Their entire system focused on the temple. It represented the presence of God. It represented how you have access to God. It represented how you can be with God.

[16:32] To suggest that the temple is obsolete is blasphemy in the mindset of a Jew. And blasphemy, you remember, is punishable by death, which is why they will kill Stephen.

If you wanted to get a little taste of this, this would be an application. After you've gone to church at Faith Family, go visit a Catholic church. Walk in and kick over the altar.

Just kick over the altar and scream in front of everybody, this altar is no longer necessary. I assure you that there will be a very angry priest that will be there in that Catholic church that will escort you out of the building.

Why? Because if you walk in and say, this altar is no longer necessary, this altar is obsolete, you are getting to the very heart of what they're trying to teach.

And by the way, I do believe that altar is obsolete. I do believe that altar is unnecessary. Thank you that a few of you said amen. That is why, and what's interesting, I grew up Southern Baptist, not Catholic.

[17:46] Some of you grew up Catholic, but even in Southern Baptist life, they would say, when we would do invitation time, they would say, if anybody wants to come and pray at the altar, let me be clear to you, we do not have an altar.

And we will never have an altar. The reason is, because our altar is Jesus Christ. You will not hear me say, come to the altar.

What you will hear me say every week is come to Jesus, because the final sacrifice on the altar has already been given. So you don't need to bring anything to the altar.

Jesus has already brought himself to the altar, and it is finished. That's very different than Catholic theology, but that's for another sermon. I'm just trying to get you in trouble with the Catholics, okay? Like they were in trouble with the Jews. It's a taste of what's going on here. The Jewish people couldn't fathom the idea that the temple would be destroyed, because everything they clung to about having access to God rested on the temple.

[18:53] But here's what Stephen's saying, and I'm getting to a point. Hang with me. Stephen is saying this, and it's so critically important. Notice it on the screen. The temple is not forsaken. The temple is just fulfilled.

The temple's not forsaken. I'm not telling you guys that the temple's a bad thing. I'm just telling you it's not needed anymore because of Jesus. It's not that we don't have a temple.

It's not that we don't have a sacrifice. It's not that we don't have a priest. We actually have... By the way, it's not that we don't have an altar. We have all of those things. His name is Jesus.

And so if you're putting the focus on a building, or you're putting the focus on an altar, you're putting the focus on a sacrifice, the problem with that is you're missing Jesus. That's Stephen's message.

That's what he's proclaiming. And the Jews are having a hissy fit. That's a theological category. A hissy fit. They are enraged because he's calling into very question the very focus of their system.

[19:59] Well, of course, this is the whole point of the book of Hebrews. Look at Hebrews 9, verse 11. When Christ appeared as the high priest of the good things that have come, then through the

greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, because that is not of this creation.

It's not a physical building. He entered, say this with me, once for all into the holy places, into the temple, not made, not by the means of blood of goats and calves, but by the means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

That is, it's really finished. You don't need a temple anymore. You don't need an altar anymore. You don't need a sacrifice anymore. You don't need a priest anymore. You have all of those things in Jesus.

And so Stephen's argument continues to say, because I want to give you the full argument here, is he's saying, listen, listen, listen, listen. You're so caught up on the fact that Jesus, or that the presence of God, is confined to a place, confined to the temple.

But don't, remember, he's talking to Jewish people. Have you ever read your Old Testament? I mean, imagine saying that to a Jewish person. Do you have any idea of your Old Testament?

[ 21 : 18 ] The presence of God was never confined to a place. And he gives four quick examples. We'll just hit this quick, and then we'll get to the point. The first example is Abraham. Look at chapter 7, verse 2.

This is in Stephen's sermon. Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in what? Mesopotamia.

Did you know that the presence of God was in Mesopotamia? It wasn't confined to a temple. It actually came, the glory of God, the presence of God, came to Abraham in Mesopotamia.

Now look at Joseph. This is chapter 7, verse 9. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him.

Guess what? God's presence was not only in Mesopotamia with Abraham, it was in Egypt with Joseph. Example number 3, Moses. This is chapter 7, verse 33.

[ 22 : 15 ] Then the Lord said to him, Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you're standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. I've heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them.

And now come, I send you to Egypt. This is essentially what Stephen is arguing, is this is so good. If you've zoned out, zone back in, alright? Stephen says this, You do realize, before there was ever a holy land, there was holy ground.

Long before there was ever a temple, the presence of God was with Moses and his people in Egypt. It was in Mesopotamia. It was with Joseph.

It was with Moses. One more example. This is said through David in Solomon, chapter 7, verse 48. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says.

In other words, God has never been limited to a place. So why are you making such a big deal when I say that this temple is not the main focus?

[ 23 : 23 ] Jesus is the main focus. For the presence of God is with the person of Christ. This is Stephen's point. Listen, Jesus being the temple shouldn't bother you because God's never been limited to a place.

In fact, the temple was only preparing you for experiencing God's presence in a person. And here's the good news of the gospel, is that if you have Christ, think about this entire argument I've just laid out for the last five, seven minutes.

If Jesus is where the presence of God now dwells, if you have Jesus, you will never, ever be separated from God.

He is always with you. Always with you. There is nothing that will ever happen in your life that will separate you from the presence of God and the person of Jesus Christ.

Is that not what Paul argues? Some of you are already there in your mind. Romans chapter 8, 37. No, in all things, we're more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

[ 24 : 41 ] I am sure that neither death nor life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

So let me land the plane on this first point. Here it is. If you know, are you listening? If you know and you really believe that there's nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, that can keep you from the presence of God in Christ Jesus, then what could ever frighten you?

Listen to me. John Rogers could walk into the fire like he was walking to his wedding. Stephen could stand before the Jews as rocks ripped off his flesh.

and you and I can most certainly live our daily lives on mission for Jesus confident that there is nothing we will face that will take God's presence from us.

When you, I believe that Stephen believed that and Stephen's able to stand there and say, these rocks that you're throwing at me can't separate me from the presence of God.

[ 26 : 12 ] For in Christ nothing can separate me from the love of God. So when you believe that, it builds up a courage in you to say, listen, there is nothing in this world that can happen to me that can separate me from God.

Number two. Number two is this. I'll go shorter on these next two maybe. Number two. In Christ, not only are you confident that nothing will separate you from the presence of God, but in Christ you have the righteousness of God.

In Christ you have the righteousness of God. Bad-mouthing the temple was not the only thing that Stephen's accused of here. He's also accused of bad-mouthing the law of Moses.

Go back to chapter 6 and verse 13 where they say this. They set up false witnesses and said, this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place, the temple, and the law.

So Stephen here is not only speaking blasphemous words about the temple, he's also speaking blasphemous words about the law.

[ 27 : 21 ] Now just a little note here, by the way, religious people always accuse gospel people of disrespecting the law. It's happened many times in my ministry.

Religious people will always accuse gospel people of disrespecting the law. But here's the difference, this is so good, zone in. The difference between religious people and gospel people is this.

It's this simple, notice it on the screen. Religious people focus on keeping the law, gospel people focus on the one who kept the law. That's the difference.

So religious people are going to say, no, no, no, you can't say anything bad about the law. This is all about obedience and you've got to do better and you've got to live up and man, yesterday's got to be better than the day before and it's all about you keeping the law.

But that's not the gospel. The gospel is we're focusing not on keeping the law, we're focusing on the only one who can actually keep the law and his righteousness applied to us.

[ 28 : 24 ] That's the gospel. But once you start saying just like, listen, you don't really need the temple. It's not that the temple's a bad thing. It served its purpose for a time.

God established the temple in the Old Testament. It's not bad, it was just temporary. It's the same thing with the law. Paul will even say, it's not that the law is bad.

I'm not saying that the law is bad. No, no, no. In fact, the law is actually holy. In that, the law does what the law was intended to do and the purpose of the law was not for you to keep it but for you to realize you can't.

And then realize there's only one who did and you'll base your whole life by faith on him. That's not speaking bad about the law.

And I preach this all the time. There are some people that don't like this. I don't preach law keeping. I preach Jesus following. Because the purpose of Christianity is to follow the one who did what you can't do.

[ 29 : 39 ] That's what this whole thing is about. So Stephen is getting in trouble for the same thing we're trying to get in trouble with here at Faith Family. And that is we are not focusing on the law.

We're focusing on the one that kept the law. And that's not saying anything bad about the law because the law served its purpose. And just like in the temple once you get to Jesus you don't need the temple anymore.

He is the temple. And when you get to Jesus you don't need the law anymore. It's about following him and having his life be lived through you. Not following a list of do's and don'ts and get better and did I do better today than no.

Follow Christ and put your eyes on him. Did that make sense? Is that helpful at all? I mean that's what gospel people do and that's what Stephen is preaching here.

We know that this is what Stephen is focusing on because look at of all the words he uses of Jesus look at what the or the names of Jesus look at what the one he uses in chapter 7 verse 51.

[ 30 : 42 ] I love this. Talk about politically correct preaching. You stiff necked people uncircumcised in heart and ears you always resist the Holy Spirit.

How's that for an introduction? As your fathers did so do you. In other words your fathers were so hard of hearing they killed the prophets and now you have Jesus who have taught the apostles and the apostles us and we're proclaiming to you the good news of the gospel and you don't want to hear it either.

Just like your fathers killed the prophets before you kill us now verse 52 which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute and they killed those that announced beforehand the coming of interesting name the righteous one.

Why does Stephen call Jesus the righteous one? He could have said the sovereign one he could have said the holy one he could have said the anointed one but instead he says the righteous one why?

Because what is the whole idea behind the law? Being righteous before God and what Stephen is saying is what the gospel declares that there is only one righteous one and I'm sorry to break it to you it's not you it's Jesus Jesus Jesus he's the righteous one and by this this will preach man this will preach you'll look it on the screen by saying this Stephen didn't undermine the law he actually understood the law he got it he understood the purpose of which the law was given and it wasn't to keep it was to make us realize we need Jesus Stephen understood that the law existed to expose our unrighteousness and lead us to the righteous one and you ask this but how does that make us courageous how does it not but I'm glad you asked the question so let me answer it how does knowing that you have the righteousness of Jesus think with me how does knowing put yourself in Stephen's shoes for a moment we're almost done how does knowing that the righteousness he needs before God has nothing to do with himself and has everything to do with Jesus how does that give him courage to face death like the face of an angel it's this most of the reasons that we're afraid to die if you put aside all the personal ones like you don't want to leave family or things like that if we think spiritually most of the reasons people are afraid to die is that they're afraid they haven't done enough and they need a little bit more time to get their act together maybe if

[ 33 : 40 ] I add a little bit more to my resume then I can stand before God but listen Lord just help me communicate this clearly when I realize that I have been given the very righteousness of God and nothing I do will make me more or less righteous I'm ready to stand before God tonight if tonight it and the stone hopefully not from you the stones start flying and Jesus is ready for my part of this mission that he's called me to to be done I'm not afraid to stand before God because it's not about my righteousness it's about the righteous one so I'm not afraid to die

I'm not afraid to stand before the holy God not based on my righteousness but based on the righteousness of Jesus do you see do you see how the righteousness of God gives us courage to live with courage even in the face of death so Stephen knows what hey nothing can separate me from God God's presence is confined to a temple he's with me he's never going to leave me or forsake me secondly he's the righteous one I understand the law it exposed my unrighteousness and I'm all in on Jesus I'm not all in on me I'm not all in on Moses I'm all in on Jesus he's enough his righteousness is enough for me and so if now is my time Lord here I come and then third and finally it's this it's found in the vision that he gets at the end of chapter 7 and we're done look at verse 55 of chapter 7 but he

Stephen full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said behold I see the heavens open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God what a beautiful vision that God gives Stephen in his dying moment in these final moments of his life he receives this glorious vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God there's been a lot of debate as to what this means I personally think the most likely and biblically faithful interpretation of this is that it's a visual picture of something the apostle John describes in 1 John chapter 5 verse 1 notice it on the screen my little children I'm writing these things to you so that you may not sin but if anyone does sin here it is we have an advocate with the father Jesus Christ the righteous in other words Stephen think about this this is what I think is going on all of these accusations are coming at him you bad mouth the temple you disrespect the law you're a blasphemer all these accusations are coming and he looks up and he sees his advocate his high priest his savior standing at the right hand of the father making inter session for Stephen accusations advocate accusations advocate so that Stephen is able to die courageously Stephen knows in this moment that no matter what happens to him he is accepted by God because he has an advocate in

Jesus and that reality brings him hope in the midst of this opposition and in the face of his death faith family please listen to this for just a moment let's let's read it on the screen and let's just really think about it here's the point notice it on the screen regardless of what anyone says about you think of the accusations they're saying about Stephen what Jesus says about you in the presence of the father is the most important thing said about you I'm going to read it again and I really want you to feel it and take it home with you let's look at it again regardless of what anybody says about you what Jesus says about you in the presence of the father is the most important thing said about you you have an advocate not just in this life you have an advocate before

[ 39 : 14 ] God and that means faith family that when the culture says you're narrow minded you have an advocate when others say you're not fit for the mission you have an advocate when your boss says you're the worst employee ever you have an advocate!

When your coach says you're not good enough you have an advocate! When your own self tells you you're a loser you have an advocate! When the enemy says you're the worst Christian that's ever walked the earth you have an advocate before God and his name is Jesus and there is no greater lawyer in the courtroom of God than the righteous one himself who stands on your behalf and if that doesn't give you courage I do not know what will listen Stephen lives a courageous life why maybe there are other reasons but I think for one he knew that whatever happened to him nothing would separate him from the presence of God nothing he knew that this life wasn't about him it was about the righteousness of Jesus of the righteous one and so it's not a matter of is enough because

Jesus is enough I'm not afraid and lastly is no matter what anybody says about me no matter what anybody does to me no matter what the world thinks about me I have an advocate who defends my case before the father the righteous one Stephen, just like John Rogers and many others throughout the history of the church, had courage.

He had the courage to stand on his convictions. He had the courage to forgive his enemies. He had the courage to face death for the sake of the mission.

And that shouldn't surprise us. Why is that? It's because this whole mission was started by the one who faced accusations of blasphemy.

[ 41 : 31 ] But he never compromised the truth. The one who had the courage to say from the cross to his enemies, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

The one, listen faith family, the one who had the courage to walk to his death like he was walking to his wedding. And that's because he was.

For through his death and resurrection, Jesus would make you his bride. He walked to his death like walking to his wedding.

Because it is through his death and resurrection that you became his bride. And nothing, nothing will separate you from that love.

And all God's people said, amen. So pray with me. Pray with me. Lord, give us courage as a church. It is clear not only in the book of Acts, but through the study of church history that courage is a characteristic of people on mission for Jesus.

[ 42 : 50 ] And that's because, as we talked about several weeks ago, that there's no mission without persecution. Opposition is not an if. It's when. And to what degree.

And it may not, like Stephen, end in the loss of our life, but it will cost us something. We're crazy to think that there's not going to be some level of cost in being on mission for Christ.

And so we need to be courageous people. We need to be the kind of people that are bold. And what's so important for us to understand, Lord, I pray that your spirit is impressing this upon us tonight, is that that courage doesn't come from within us.

It comes from the truth of the gospel. It comes from really believing that nothing will separate us from you. That it isn't about our life. It's about the righteous one.

And that regardless of what anybody says or how we're misunderstood in this world, Jesus, you're our advocate, our great high priest at the right hand of the Father who loves to make intercession for us.

[ 43 : 58 ] When these things become more than sermons, but actually become real truth we live by, we won't be afraid.

So take Stephen's life in Acts 6 and 7 and encourage us tonight. Encourage your people to be courageous, to be graciously courageous in this culture, at work, with our friends, unashamed of the

gospel of Jesus.

And we pray that in Jesus' name. And God's people said, Amen. Amen.

Thank you.