

Message Date: 09-20-20

To the Ends of the Earth- ACTS Part 4: Courage!

Message Title: Week 3, A Portrait of Courage

✠ **Considering Courage**

- *When you hear the word COURAGE, what comes to mind? A person? A story?*
- *Maybe think of a person like Desmond Doss, first American conscientious objector – meaning he wouldn't fire a gun- to be awarded the Medal of Honor for his incredible courage during the battle for Okinawa. He rescued 75 of his fellow soldiers. It's a story of almost superhuman courage.*

- *As a lover of history, favorite moment of courage is when Martin Luther was on trial for his writings before Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther stared down full power of the Holy Roman Empire – who had the power to kill him- and facing his accusers he famously replied:*
 - o *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. Here I stand, I can do no other- May God help me. Amen. COURAGE!*

- *But... just what IS courage? One of those things that's hard to define but you know it when you see it?*
- *Is Courage when you keep your wits in situation of great fear, danger?*
- *Do something selfless for the benefit of another, at great personal risk to yourself?*
- *Overcome fear to act with integrity, to help another person, do the right thing?*

- *What situations call for courage? Will be different for different people, because we are afraid of different things.*
 - o *What about working with children? For some, terrifying (Arnold, Kindergarten Cop)*
 - o *What about praying with someone. Sharing your faith?*

- *Real question ... where does courage COME FROM?*
 - o *Something people are born with?*
 - o *Developed in us over time, in response to external influences, values, life exp?*
 - o *Or, could courage be a quality within a person- that when the moment of challenge comes, enables them to access, to tap into, something beyond themselves?*
- *Something they discover- almost like it is given to them- when they face a situation that would cause others to fail in fear- to instead STAND. TO ACT.*
- *In that moment to possess the power of Integrity. Hope. Peace. Compassion. Love.*

- *There are moments of great courage throughout scripture... But one of the greatest is what we see in the person of STEPHEN- in our scripture today- as he faces his death at the hands of a religious lynch mob.*

✠ In the conclusion of Stephen's story, we see the *nature* of his courage, but more importantly, we see the SOURCE of his courage. The source that is still OUR source of courage today.

- *BUT BEFORE we go there, today is SUNDAY, September 20th, I'm Pastor Ethan, and this is TRINITY ONLINE. Thanks for joining with us.*

- *We were introduced to Stephen in Acts 6, where Luke described him as a “man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”*
- *Stephen is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, and falsely accused of speaking against God, the temple, and the mosaic law.*
- *In response to these charges, Stephen puts Sanhedrin on trial, laying out the history of Israel ending with the indictment we find in Acts 7:51-53...*

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.”*

† A portrait of Courage

- *As you might can imagine, that didn’t go over well. This story ends with an amazing portrait of courage.. what may be he most compelling moment in the New Testament outside of the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.*
- *Let’s take closer look. Stephen ends his speech, and the crowd’s reaction is visceral. NIV says they were ‘furious’, but NASB is closer ‘cut to the quick’- the Greek literally describes them being ripped, or sawn through, in their hearts. They were enraged to their absolute core. The image of ‘grinding’ or gnashing their teeth is one of fury that is physically consuming.*
- *CONTRAST THIS WITH STEPHEN. He is facing a storm of absolute rage. This is no fair trial, he knows it, and he knows his life is in grave danger.*
- *While the Sanhedrin and the crowds eyes are blinded by anger, Stephen is at complete peace- and his eyes are opened to see the Glory of God.*

† Seeing the Glory of God

But 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. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

- *What an image! In this moment that would cause anyone’s strength to fail, Stephen is completely sustained by the Holy Spirit.*
- *Lots of discussion about what Stephen saw. What does it mean that he saw the ‘Glory of God’? Can we even imagine this? It’s clear Luke wants us to remember that at his point of ultimate sacrifice and trust, God revealed himself to Stephen. God gave Stephen a glimpse directly into heaven, and what he saw was Jesus standing at the right hand of God. THAT is the statement that moved the crowd from being consumed by anger, to being murderous. But why?*
- *In his commentary, Darrel Bock points out that to the crowd, Stephen is attacking the very uniqueness of God by stating that Jesus is standing next to Him in heaven- and sharing in His Glory. Jesus isn’t just WITH God, he IS GOD.*
- *Furthermore, Stephens’s vision validates one of the key points of his speech- that God dwelling place is Heaven, NOT the temple.*
- *One other observation here- this is subtle, but revealing (and fascinating). It has to do with Jesus’ posture.*

- *In Ephesians 1:20, Paul is describing Christ's ascension when he says that God raised Christ from the dead and SEATED Jesus as his right hand in the heavenly realms.*
- *But in Stephens vision, Jesus isn't seated, he is STANDING. Add to this the unique way Stephen refers to Jesus... as the SON OF MAN. Stick with me here...*
- *This is the only place outside of the gospels where the exact term 'son of man' is used as a name for Jesus. IN THE GOSPELS, Jesus used this term to describe himself. Late in Jesus' ministry, he used this title to describe his authority to act as JUDGE at the right hand of God- Matthew 26:64.*

Jesus "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

- *What event is Jesus speaking of? The day of the lord- the second coming of the messiah, when he returns in victory and judgment.*
- *Who did Jesus say that to? The same people who were condemning Stephen now.*
- *The image Stephen describes, which would not have been lost on the religious rulers of the Sanhedrin, is of Jesus- with God, AS God, standing with God in heaven- not in the temple- standing in Judgement against their treatment of Stephen, but even more, against their rejection of Jesus as the messiah.*
- *Jesus was standing as vindication of Stephen and his testimony, and he was standing against them.*

✠ **Defining moment!** The core issue from this point on would become the question *who is JESUS?*

- *This is the question that will divide the movement of Christ followers from the rest of Judaism- What do you believe about Jesus? Is he just a man, either a good man or a rebel who needed to be killed... OR, is he GOD. Risen from the dead, with God in His Glory, with authority over all creation.*
- *Stephens's confession was that Jesus is the Lord, sharing the Glory of God. This was a statement that could not be tolerated, and it is why he was killed.*

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

✠ **Stephen's last breath**

- *It's impossible to capture the drama and tragedy of that moment, as the crowd loses control in the passion of its anger.*
- *Being dragged out of the city was the treatment for a person who had committed the ultimate sin, who had insulted God, as was the act of stoning. Stoning was not a quick death, and this act was witnessed, approvingly, by a young man named Saul.*
- *But even at his death, Stephen never succumbed to fear, anger, or despair. With his last breath, Stephens trust is in Christ, and his attitude toward the people murdering him is love and forgiveness.*

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

– **If that sounds familiar, it’s because we heard Jesus say almost the exact thing at his death.**

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

...46 “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

– **Jesus uttered these words, and breathed his last. When Stephen said this, Luke records that he fell asleep. That term is not just Luke using a euphemism for death- no. Rather, it is a statement that Stephens physical death was not the end of the story, and for Stephen, it was the moment of entry into complete fullness of LIFE.**

– **In every way, the stand of Stephen is a portrait of courage.**

✠ **Bringing it back to us**

– **LETS BRING THIS BACK TO US, I’ll do so with question- where did Stephens’s courage come from? What was it’s source?**

– **From his upbringing? Life experiences? Just how he was wired? These were all part of who Stephen was, BUT WHEN IT CAME DOWN TO THAT MOMENT...**

• **In Stephen’s moment of truth, his courage came from the LORD.**

– **IT CAME FROM THE LORD. Stephen looked to Christ in absolute trust, and by the Holy Spirit, God provided Stephen the peace, hope, and courage only God could give.**

– **NOW. Most likely, none of us will ever be in Stephen’s situation, where we are facing the threat of death because of our faith. There are people in our world who DO- severe persecution of believers is a very real thing in parts of the world. BUT...**

✠ **When we are filled with the Spirit, living out of our relationship with Christ, God WILL lead us into situations that require great courage! And when He does this, He will be the source of the courage we need.**

– **WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?**

– **COURAGE to heal a relationship, humble yourself, seek reconciliation**

– **COURAGE to walk alongside someone who needs support and compassion**

– **COURAGE to be generous, to serve sacrificially, to give of yourself for the benefit of another.**

– **COURAGE to seek help for a problem you know you can’t handle on your own**

– **COURAGE to let yourself be vulnerable**

– **COURAGE to listen to viewpoint of another person**

– **COURAGE to share your faith**

– **Examples probably endless. OUR WORLD, OUR COMMUNITY, OUR YOUTH... FAMILIES, need people of Godly courage. And when we take that step of trust, that step of faith, God promises that His Grace – our union with Him- is the foundation on which we stand.**

– **In Romans 5:1-5 Paul says this:**

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

✠ The question: How is God leading you to stand and act with courage, right now, in the midst of your life as it really is?

– ***As Paul was ending his first letter to the Corinthian church, he said this***

1 Corinthians 16:13 *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*

– ***In his moment of courage, Stephen looked to heaven and saw the Glory of God. CHURCH-when BY THE SPIRIT we stand, we act, with the love and courage Christ gives, people will see the Glory of God in us.***