

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

One neat thing about Bible study is that it's not a book of dry doctrinal statements. Not that there aren't some doctrinal statements, but when there is one and we want to see what it looks like in real life, there are always examples contained right in the Bible. The Old Testament is filled with illustrations and stories of the truths of God. So are the Gospels. So is the book of Acts. The epistles tend to be more doctrinal and logical in nature, but that's okay. We need the doctrinal statements too.

If you just looked at the title of today's message, those of you who know your Bibles well would probably guess that the text for this message will be Revelation 2:10. It's a verse that is a very popular confirmation verse. It's also one that you hear frequently at funerals. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Beautiful passage! Wonderful encouragement from God. But here's the problem. We think about the passage: "Be faithful." Okay, I'll be faithful. Full of faith. Not wavering. I got it. I think. "To the point of death." Until the day I die, be faithful. Okay. Got it. "And I will give you the crown of life." God will give me victory which consists of life everlasting. Okay. Short sermon today. Let's go home.

But here's the problem... and here's why we're not ready to call it a day yet. When is the last time in your daily life you recalled this passage? When is the last time it gave you encouragement and strength? I'm wondering if we find it rather easy to say we will be faithful unto death, thinking our death is a long way off, and thinking that we'll never be required to give our life for Christ. And if this passage has never crossed you mind on a day that wasn't a Sunday, then I would suggest we need to take a much closer look at it.

What if the passage said, "Be faithful, even to the point of being made fun of for your faith... even to the point of enduring Christian stereotypes. ...even to the point of being ostracized by your peer group. ...even to the point of losing your job. ...even to the point of coping with cancer, or the loss of a loved one. Be faithful even when someone hurts you deeply. Be faithful, even when it means doing what is very hard instead of what would be easy. If the passages said any of those things, I wonder if we would have to think harder about it. But the truth is, it goes beyond all of those things and it states the very hardest circumstances we can ever have to deal with: death. And it says be faithful even to that point! Therefore, all the lesser things I just mentioned are necessarily included also.

So to help us with this passage, we're going to take a look at a Bible story that illustrates the important truth contained in that passage. "God shows us what it looks like to be faithful, even to the point of death." God shows us what he means in this passage through the story of Stephen found in: Acts 7:54-60

Let me bring you up to speed before we look at the text. Our story centers on a Christian man named Stephen. We're introduced to Stephen in Acts chapter 6. When the church grew rapidly, it had some growing pains. There were some complaints when some non-Jewish widows thought they were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. One way to resolve the problem would be for the apostles to invest more of their time and effort into the food distribution. But that would have distracted from gospel ministry. So the church came up with a better solution. They chose seven believers full of the Spirit and wisdom to oversee the food distribution so the apostles wouldn't have to. One of the seven was Stephen.

But don't think of Stephen as a table waiter. He was a man who was very knowledgeable in Scripture. Very strong in his faith. And very outspoken for the truth of God. He also was able to do miraculous signs.

Some unbelieving Jews tried to argue with Stephen and prove that the faith proclaiming was not from God. But as hard as they tried to argue against him, Stephen's arguments always silenced them. The Holy Spirit gave him great wisdom, and they only grew more and more frustrated.

So they made up some charges against him in order to silence him, **"We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."** There was no truth to these lies, but he was brought before the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, anyway. Stephen was given the opportunity to defend himself. He took advantage of the opportunity to preach a sermon and proclaim the truth of God. Please find some time today to read Acts chapter 7 so you get can hear his amazing sermon. It will also give you an excellent review of Old Testament Bible history. At the end of his sermon, Stephen boldly pointed out the sin of the people, telling them how they had betrayed and murdered the promised Savior, Jesus Christ. And here we pick up the story:

**"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.**

It's never pleasant when someone points out your sins. Even when they're right and they do it in love, we often defensively lash back against them. Stephen pushed these people hard... to the breaking point. Either they would break and repent, or they would break and lash out violently. It was the latter that happened.

Usually if one side in an argument is angry and emotional, the other side is too. But look at the contrast here as Stephen is described:

**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." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.**

1) **Compare** the attitude and demeanor of the Sanhedrin with that of Stephen!

- Closed to God vs open to God
- Full of themselves vs. full of the Holy Spirit.
- Full of anger vs full of peace.
- Full of hatred vs. full of love.
- Full of violence and spite vs. full of forgiveness.

There is no question who was of God that day and who was not. The Spirit in Stephen was evident in his words, actions and demeanor.

2) **Note something about God.** He hasn't left Stephen. He gave him the needed words at the right time. He gave him courage. He gave him a vision of heaven. Stephen saw with his eyes what we have been promised, namely, that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us. As we heard in the Gospel lesson today, Jesus is our great high priest who prays for us. Goes to bat for us. Intercedes for us. God is right there the whole time. He knows exactly what's happening.

3) **And note something about Stephen.** He is at peace. With all the violence and hatred around him, he is calm, peaceful, with the appearance of an angel. This is a man whose confidence is completely in his God. Stephen knows that God loves him, for his God gave his Son for him to die on a cross. Stephen could see where this all was heading, but he still didn't panic. He wasn't afraid. God was still God. His love had not changed. His eternal future was still secure. So he stood his ground, knowing that the Sanhedrin had absolutely no power against him that could hurt him in any real or significant way.

And here's how the text wraps up. **“Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”** This little detail included because we're going to hear a whole bunch more about Saul in the book of Acts. A man we know better as the apostle Paul.

And the conclusion: **While they were stoning him,** ...suddenly a bright light from heaven shown down. And a loud voice proclaimed, “Why are you fighting me? Why do you persecute my servant?” A whirlwind came down and picked up Stephen and whisked him away to safety.

That's not how it ends, is it? Here's the actual ending: **Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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 you were an early believer, and you were making up stories so that more people would be followers of Jesus, is this the kind of story you would make up? Stephen faithfully followed Jesus unto death... and then he was put to death. He did everything right. He did exactly what Jesus wanted. And then he died for doing it. No rescue. No miraculous delivery. That's a sad ending, isn't it? Do you think people read this story and said, “That does it! Now I'm convinced that I want to be a follower of Jesus! How do I sign up? How do I become a part of this movement?” Why is this in the Bible? Why didn't the early believers edit this out?

1) This is the true word of God. 2) God is illustrating for us the truth: Be faithful, even to the point of death.

While Stephen wasn't miraculously rescued from dying, he was miraculously rescued. Through these evil people, God gave Stephen the goal of his faith: eternal life with Jesus in heaven. Stephen got eternal life because Jesus rescued him from all his sins through his perfect life and death on the cross as Stephen's substitute. Stephen's rescue was most certainly given, but it actually happened when Stephen came to faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized. He was rescued and made a child of God at that moment. And ironically he received his eternal reward at the hands of men who hated him and everything he believed.

Friend, be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. Stand firm. Don't compromise God's truth. Don't be ashamed of the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't hide your faith. Be faithful. Make no mistake, this world will attack us. Maybe not with sticks and stones, but with names (which do hurt.) With words. With alienation. With gossip. And make no mistake, the trouble and hardships of this world can shake our faith in Jesus.

How can we stand firm and be faithful unto death?

- 1) Know that **God is with you.** He never leaves you. He's by your side in any and every circumstance. Look to God in your time of trial or persecution of suffering. 1) **Look at his glory.** This is the maker of heaven and earth! All is made by him and for him. He lacks no power. A glimpse of his glory give you confidence. 2) **Look to Jesus!** Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” This is Jesus who lived for you. Died for you. Rose to assure you. Ascended for you. See the vision of Stephen... Jesus at the right hand of the Father coming to your defense and speaking on your behalf. “Father, he / she is with me. They're covered in my blood. Love them. Help them.” And the Father does.
- 2) **God has a plan.** We are so limited and can't see beyond the here and now. We can't imagine how the sufferings of this world could be a blessing. We especially can't imagine how death could be a blessing. But keep God's big goal for you in mind. His big goal is not to give you wealth and health on earth. It's not to deliver you from every temporary problem. His goal is to connect you to Christ, and keep you connected into eternity. His goal is to give you the crown of life... to give you an eternal inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade. That's the big picture!

- 3) **Stand up for God's truth no matter what.** We live in a day and age where standing for convictions is hard to find. Politicians are an example. Maybe I'm getting skeptical, but do any of them stand for anything anymore? Do truly *all* of them just say whatever is needed to get elected? May we never be political Christians, saying whatever is expedient to win the approval of men. We seek the approval of one: God. So whatever it may cost you, stand firm in Christ. Be faithful, even to the point of death.

When you're made fun of for your faith... ostracized by your peer group. ...losing your job. ... coping with cancer ... losing of a loved one. ... when people hurt you deeply. ...when faced with what's hard but right... when you're faced with death... look to God. See Jesus. Know his power and love. And be faithful. Be faithful, friend, even to the point of death, and you will receive the crown of life! Amen.

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History approximates Stephen's story around A.D. 34-35, shortly after Jesus' crucifixion<sup>[citation needed]</sup>.

According to Chapter 6 of [The Acts of the Apostles](#), Stephen was among seven men of the early church at Jerusalem appointed to serve as deacon. However, he is depicted as also successfully preaching to his fellow Jews and bringing many to accept [Jesus](#) as the [Messiah](#). After a dispute with the members of a [synagogue](#) of "Roman Freedmen," he is denounced for [blasphemy](#) against God and [Moses](#) ([Acts 6:11](#)) and speaking against the [Temple](#) and the [Law](#). Stephen is tried before the [Sanhedrin](#). His defense is presented as accusing the Jews of persecuting the [prophets](#) who had spoken out against the sins of the nation:

"Which one of the Prophets did your fathers not persecute, and they killed the ones who prophesied the coming of the Just One, of whom now, too, you have become betrayers and murderers." (7:52)

While on trial, he experienced a [theophany](#) in which he saw both [God the Father](#) and [God the Son](#):

"Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." ([Acts 7:56](#)) This vision of Christ standing differs from other Scripture which indicates Jesus sits at the right hand of God - perhaps inferring that Christ stood in honor of Stephen whose martyrdom was near.

He is condemned and [stoned](#) to death by an infuriated mob, which is encouraged by Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as [Saint Paul](#) the [Apostle](#). After his own conversion to Christianity, Paul makes reference to witnessing Stephen's martyrdom in his writings.<sup>[3]</sup>