

“Remarkable Courage”

Profiles of Faith #4: Stephen
Read Acts 6-7

Have you ever been really intimidated? Imagine if you believed something deeply, but it greatly upset a very large number of people. Imagine if their opposition was so great that they were willing to challenge you, even have you arrested. Imagine if they did arrest you, then forced you to stand in front of a large group of “experts” who were foaming at the mouth with anger towards you. Finally, imagine if they convicted you and sentenced you to death by stoning. How would you get through this? You would need remarkable courage; a kind not natural to man, but given to us through complete and total surrender to God.

This is the legacy Stephen left us. He was opposed by Jews who thought they squashed the new movement of Jesus, only to find that it was alive, well and growing. They trumped up some bogus charges (Acts 6:11-14), then brought him before the Sanhedrin. This was no harmless little chat. The Sanhedrin was a powerful high court, made up of Jewish chief priests, elders and teachers of the law. In New Testament times, there were 71 members in total. Stephen could have met with this large group, or he could have met with a sub-council, which would have consisted of 23 members. Due to the serious nature of his “crimes,” my guess is that he met with the large group! The Romans gave them authority to govern their faith and its practices. Their only limitation regarding punishment was that they couldn’t sentence someone to death (John 18:31). In stoning Stephen to death, they either got quick permission from the Roman authorities, or they were so furious that they ignored the rule and carried it out themselves immediately! This could have been the case, since Jerusalem was instantly sent into turmoil and widespread persecution broke out against the Christians, condoned by the authorities (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-3).

How do we know Stephen had a deep, divinely given courage? The story tells us that he was out doing “great wonders and miracles” among the people during a dangerous time for Christians (Acts 6:8). He firmly stood up for his faith when greatly opposed. He gave a speech that he most surely knew could end with his death. He confronted the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, calling them out plainly (Acts 7:51-53). He looked up to heaven, and was rewarded for his bravery by being shown the glory of God and was comforted by the suffering, risen savior himself (7:56) – wow! He asked God to receive his spirit upon death, indicating that he knew full well his life was in God’s hands (7:59). Finally, he did something so few have the courage to do: he prayed that God would forgive those murdering him (7:60). He quite literally imitated the faith, surrender and courage of Jesus. There is only one word to describe this level of spirituality – remarkable.

Stephen is a hero, but his courage is something very accessible to you and I. We may never be opposed like this for sharing our faith, but we will be confronted with many situations that will tempt us to take matters into our own hands. We will be scared about doing the right thing. We will be intimidated by people who don’t like the fruit of our Christians lives. We will be slandered, tempted to strike back out of anger. We will be lied about, gossiped about and misunderstood. We will be confronted with taking the “easy way” out of hard situations. And sooner or later, we will be forced to forgive someone who has deeply wounded us, even if they don’t see it. We will be called upon to have courage and stand strong. Let’s imitate Stephen, pray hard about putting our lives into the hands of God, and be ready to display the same courage he did. There will come a time when we will need it.

