

Joe Hill July 12, 2020
The Power of Witnessing

It is good to be here and sharing with you today as we continue our series through the book of Acts, To the Ends of the Earth. In this series we are walking through the story Acts, and how the Holy Spirit began something in a small group of people 2,000 years ago that has ultimately led to this very point, today. And in a way, you and I, as the Holy Spirit works in and through the church, are the continuation of what began in this book as we live in to our mission and call from God to spread the Good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

I want to zero in on a few key ideas that I believe God will use to speak words of encouragement and challenge to each of us: the power of the Holy Spirit and our witness, and trusting God with the outcome, even in the face of rejection and persecution. I want to revisit this story and then dive in to what it is that God might have to say to us today.

Our story starts with Stephen facing opposition because he was teaching and debating in the Synagogue. At the time, Christianity was still more of a Jesus-centered movement within Judaism more-so than it was its own separate religion. So Jewish-Christians would often spend time in the local synagogue.

Stephen's deeds of power and Spirit-empowered wisdom caused trouble for those who were not willing to accept his message. The text makes sure to mention that the Holy Spirit of God is what gives Stephen the wisdom to speak and act in this situation. And so they sought to undermine his witness with the time-honored tradition of calling him nasty names and lying about him. This resulted in being brought before the religious authorities for questioning.

The high priest asks Stephen the yes-or-no question, "Are these charges true?" and Stephen's answer? "Well you see the glory of the Lord appeared to Abraham..." He takes it back 1,500 years! But what he really does is not just give a long-winded answer. He sets the current situation in the context of God's greater salvation history- the plan that God has been working all along in and through His people to bring salvation to every nation, culminating in Jesus Christ.

He recounts from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon. He recounts a long history of God's continual love, grace and faithfulness, even in the midst of the unfaithfulness of his people.

And then he brings it home in a powerful, bold and convicting way. He challenges them. You could imagine everyone present nodding in agreement with Stephen all the way up until verse 50. They were confronted with who Jesus was and what had been done to him. They were confronted with a choice. Do we accept or reject his words... they rejected. They dragged him out of the city, and grabbing stones, an enraged mob beat him to death. And as he was being beaten; as heavy stones were bruising and breaking his bones, his last words were, "Lord, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

All the while, a young man named Saul sat by as a witness, giving his approval to the scene.

There is a lot to this account and we do not have the time to plumb its depths today, but there are some things that I believe it is important for us all to hear today.

If we were in person today, I would ask you to raise your hands if the idea of sharing your faith is intimidating. I suspect we would have a room full of raised hands. I would raise mine. Many people might think that as a ministry leader, it would be easy. But I tell you that it is easier for me to stand up and preach to a church full of Christians than to talk with Steve from the gym about my faith.

The term, “witness” is something I call a church word. Church words are words that Christians use and often assume everyone knows what they mean. Often they are words that we know how to use in a sentence, but don’t know how to define.

And this one is simple. I’m a big Law & Order fan, and so that is a helpful image for me. A witness is called up to the stand to give an account of what we have seen or experienced. This is, in a nutshell, what it means to be a witness for our faith. We tell people about what we have seen, and experienced of the love, grace and goodness of God, in our lives and through Scripture.

Sometimes we think that we need to be God’s defense attorney though. We bear the weight of feeling like we need to have the Bible memorized and have all the answers to every question. I want to reassure you today that our God is very capable of defending himself! He has already been found guilty by this world, crucified and that didn’t work. We are not asked to defend God, but to witness to the great things that he has done, in Scripture and in our lives.

In Stephen’s story, the Holy Spirit is the reason and the power behind his words. He did not go into the synagogue with his keynote speech ready. He trusted the prompting and power of the Holy Spirit. And that is what you and I are assured of as well. That the Holy Spirit of God will give you the words to say when the time comes.

If you are intimidated, uncomfortable, or even just not used to sharing your faith with others, here is something you can do. Pray that God gives you opportunities to share your faith. (This is one of those dangerous prayers- like praying for patience. When you do, God gives you the chance to be patient!) Pray for your day. For the people you will encounter, the places you will go, and the things that you will do. Ask God for the opportunities and pay attention to when he prompts you. The Holy Spirit will guide and empower your witnessing. You will have the words to say when the time comes. And it is the work of the Holy Spirit in someone else’s heart- not your eloquence or education- that has the power to change lives.

I think of the gym as a mission field because it is the place I spend the most time talking with folks who aren’t already Christian. When you work for a church, have a Christian family, and Christian friends, it’s really easy to never be around folks who aren’t Christian.

I remember one time, I did this and when I was at the gym, I was standing behind a guy a knew at the water fountain named Steve, and I felt that nudge to invite him to church because I was preaching that day. You know what I did? I ignored it. He drank his water and walked away. But then I ran into him in the locker room!.. and ignored it again! I left, “Bye Steve!” and went to my car after a side-track conversation. Then I ran into him in the parking lot! Ok, fine. Third time’s a charm. I Invited him, gave him the details, and he said he’d come. He didn’t.

That leads us to our next point. Trust God with the outcome. Being rejected, or even persecuted, is not a sign that God is not at work in and through our obedience.

People will not always accept the Gospel. Jesus is clear about this when he tells the parable of the sower. He spreads seed- which is the Gospel- over all types of soil- and out of the four mentioned, only one seems fruitful. But he spreads the seed nonetheless. Jesus does not say, “avoid sharing the Gospel with those who might not accept it.” He says, be obedient to my call and trust me with the outcome. People will not always accept what you have to say. They didn’t accept Stephen’s words that day- not even Paul. But if you don’t know how that story plays out, Paul eventually comes to know, serve, and even be persecuted for Christ Jesus. Not everyone will receive the Gospel. Not everyone will receive it now. My dad recently told me of a phone call with a friend of his from high school- Al. Al told him that he had recently decided to be baptized. When my dad asked to hear how this all came about, Al said it started 35 years ago when you decided to give up drinking. Seeds planted 35 years ago, by God’s grace, produced faith. Not everyone will receive the Gospel. Not everyone will receive it now. But please do not believe that God is not at work through every word we speak of His goodness, love and grace through Jesus Christ.

When God asks you to share your faith- to witness- to someone, trust Him with the outcome.

Now we can’t really deal with this account without dealing with the idea of persecution. A Greek man named Stephanos, full of God’s Holy Spirit, boldly and compassionately spoke the message of Jesus Christ. And he gave his life for it.

Side-note: Now here is a side-note, and I don’t want to share this message and not say this. I have known plenty of Christians who cling to the passages about persecution with pride. They are quick to bring up that Jesus said, “The world will hate you because of me.” But here is what I want us all to remember along with this passage. If you are criticized, rejected, or persecuted, make sure it is because of Jesus, and not because you are obnoxious. Make sure that it is because you are loving in a way that the world does not understand. Make it because you are forgiving in a way that is hard to accept. Make sure that it is because you are not willing to sit idly by in the face of gross injustice. Be rejected because you care for those that others deem unworthy. If we are to be rejected, let us be rejected because we are like Jesus. Not because we are jerks.

Many Christians in America feel persecuted. Being Christian, especially in the Bay Area, is not fashionable. It will not make you popular, and may not make you any friends. I know folks for whom it has cost them jobs. I know young people who have been rejected by friends. I know folks- and have been one of them- who have been criticized and ridiculed for their beliefs.

But I am a bit defensive of the word, “persecution.”

Persecution is real. There have been more martyrs for the Christian faith in the 20th and 21st centuries than in the preceding 1,900 years. In China, it is illegal to meet in Church communities that are not officially sanctioned and approved by the government- a government which espouses state atheism and an anti-religious agenda. Churches are blown up and set on fire in Egypt. Since 2003, the Christian population in Iraq has gone from 1.5 million to 120,000, and

I suspect they didn't all just move out. There are still Christians who are giving their lives for their faith. So I am a little hesitant to throw the word, persecution around lightly.

But here is what is amazing about it all to me. The Christian faith is in all of these places because of the persistent, Holy Spirit powered witness of the church that has been passed down from generation to generation, not just since the time of Jesus, but since Abraham. Since the beginning. God has proven himself faithful.

The Church of Jesus Christ will never die. It cannot be stopped, because the power of the Gospel has overcome and is victorious over every evil, all sin, even death. It cannot be stopped because it does not depend on you, or I, or this online service, this building I'm standing in or even this church community. It is dependent on the faithfulness of the unchanging God, Jesus Christ, who gave himself

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Gospel is not just a set of ideas, propositional statements, or rules that we hope others agree with. It is the Good news that God, through Jesus Christ has forgiven our sins and reconciled us to God, for now and into eternal life, and given us the Holy Spirit which works abundant life for us today- the life we were created for. And today, we are called to the stand, to testify to this Good News. So let us not be ashamed. Let us not be afraid. Let us be witnesses. Amen.