

Have you ever heard a story and asked yourself, “What would I have done?”

Hearing our text for today and the story about Stephen, I want you to ask yourself the same thing: “What would I have done?”

“Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen’s Synagogue...and they began to argue with Stephen.” Acts 6:8-9

What we know about Stephen from Scripture:

Stephen was evidently a very faithful man full of the Holy Spirit. While the Church was first getting started, He was one of seven men chosen to help oversee care for the widows and the needy. He was so passionate about the Gospel and about Jesus that he couldn’t help but talk about it wherever he went.

It wasn’t long before some powerful religious leaders heard Stephen talking about Jesus and they felt so threatened by how the Gospel challenged their religious beliefs that they began to argue with him. Arguments got so heated that the religious leaders brought him before the religious Supreme Court of the day called the Sanhedrin, and they asked Stephen to present his case.

After Stephen gives a whole speech discussing who Jesus is and why He should be believed, he calls out these people for their hypocrisy and their stubborn resistance to the Gospel. But the straw that broke the camel’s back was when Stephen looked up to heaven and said he could see Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The people got so angry at this that they decided to drag Stephen out of the city and stone him to death.

“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.” Acts 7:57-58 NIV

Can you imagine what you would’ve done differently in Stephen’s shoes? If you’re like me, you may wonder: How did Stephen have such courage? Wasn’t he afraid?

It’s Stephen’s courage in the face of fear that I want to unpack. Here are three things I think Stephen teaches us about fear:

1) Sometimes, your fears are unfounded

Are you ever afraid of something without much reason to be? Even when things were getting legal and very serious, Stephen wasn’t worried! Look at the text:

But [those opposing Stephen] were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. They also presented false witnesses who said, “This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law.” Acts 6:10-13

The men opposing Stephen brought false accusations against him. So, Stephen wasn't afraid, because he knew he was standing with the truth of God. He had the same mindset that St Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 4:

"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me." 1 Corinthians 4:3-4

Just as Stephen faced accusations that were unfounded, so too can we face fears that are unfounded. That's why all fears need to be tested against the truth. Here's a little question to ask yourself when it comes to your fears:

Fear Test: What would God say about this fear?

2) Oftentimes, your fears are beyond your control

Some people are prone to want to control every single thing that could ever happen. And yet, here's the truth: The more you fear losing control, the more you are controlled by fear!

Stephen didn't try to control the outcome. He just focused on witnessing about Jesus and speaking the truth, even when it wasn't popular. He was ready to face whatever came his way because he knew it was ultimately out of His own control.

If you struggle with giving up control, then I encourage you to pray a prayer that many who are familiar with addiction recovery programs know very well. It's called the serenity prayer:

"God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference."

This is a prayer we all need, and if you pray it and live according to it, you may find your fear resolving into faith.

3) At all times, your fears are in God's control

I want us to consider Stephen's death again, and to look at it like a kind of trust fall:

While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he died. Acts 7:59-60

Notice how Stephen entrusts himself to Jesus— much like a trust fall. And he shows us that, when you come to that moment when you take your final breath, the question is

not “what would you do?” But rather, the question is, “whom will you trust to catch you?” The answer to this question makes all the difference.

I hope your answer to that question is the same as Stephen’s and mine. I hope your answer is Jesus. Because, if your answer is Jesus, then you know that for every fear that knocks you down, and for all the times you look to heaven for help, and for that final moment when you breathe your last and take that final trust fall, Jesus will be there to catch you. And if Jesus is there to catch you, then you have nothing to fear. Amen!