



Risk-Takers: The Adventure of Walking by Faith

Sermon Title: Forward! By faith!

To be used with Session 6: Stephen: A Faith That Advances God's Kingdom

Date of First Use: July 6, 2025

Text: Acts 6:1-15, 7:51-60, 8:1-3, 22:19-21

Connection with the Study:

The final Bible study in this series shares the martyrdom of Stephen as an example of faith that advances God's Kingdom. Stephen's death proved to be only the beginning of his testimony for Christ. Instructions for writers point out how the persecution that started with his martyrdom compelled believers to spread out from Jerusalem, taking the gospel with them.

A witness of Stephen's stoning (Paul) referred to his culpability as part of his testimony of transformation from persecutor to preacher. This sermon incorporates these references, along with Stephen's inclusion in the seven servants of the church selected to help the pastors with benevolence ministry to widows. Many scholars see them as the beginning of the deacons. Giving the full overview of Stephen's influence helps members apply the need for such faith in their lives.

Introduction:

Spiritual multiplication is basic math for Christianity. Our individual witness never ends with one new believer. Each person who comes to Christ influences others who influence others who influence others. Many people are familiar with the story of Edward Kimball, a Sunday School teacher who led a young shoe salesman named Dwight L. Moody to Christ.

The gospel trail from Moody included another influential preacher, Wilbur Chapman. From him, the path led to evangelist Billy Sunday and then to Mordecai Ham at whose revival meeting a young Billy Graham was saved. Through Graham's ministry countless people have come to Christ. Moreover, thousands of preachers, Bible teachers, and missionaries have emerged, each of whom have multiplied into untold millions of believers around the world.

Stephen was like Edward Kimball as his influence did not end with his immediate audience. His faith and his faithfulness helped advance the kingdom of Christ throughout the world of the first century and beyond. You and I may never be famous. Few may remember our names. Yet, if we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us and use us as Christ's witnesses, spiritual multiplication will occur. Eternity alone may know the outcome.

1. Advancing the kingdom through faith-filled service (Acts 6:1-7).

a) Advancing the Kingdom begins with people filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

Controversy broke out in the early church over fair distribution of benevolence ministry to widows. Led by Peter and the apostles, the church agreed to select seven men to oversee this ministry. Among these men was Stephen. His qualifications were simple. He was a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”

Thinking of Stephen, memory draws me back to a great man of God who was a deacon in a church I once served. He was the epitome of a Christian gentleman. Always an encourager, he led with a servant heart. He was a wonderful man of faith and everyone who knew him recognized the activity of the Holy Spirit through his life. If you and I would be useful servants in advancing God’s kingdom, we also must be people of faith and the Holy Spirit.

b) Advancing the kingdom continues as the Word of God spreads. By assuming the servant leadership role in the church, Stephen and the others enabled the Word of God to spread quickly. Not only were the pastors freed from administrative chores so they could focus on prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), but the church people also shared the gospel. As a result, the number of disciples grew quickly. Even a large group of priests followed the faith.

When you and I accept the role of servant, our task does not end with meeting temporal needs. The ultimate goal of servant leadership is to see more people become disciples of Christ. This happens as we share the Word of God faithfully.

2. Advancing the kingdom through faith-enabled suffering (Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-60).

a) Advancing the kingdom often encounters opposition. Stephen was not seeking conflict. He was described as being “full of grace and power.” He performed marvelous signs and wonders among the people, probably through healings as well as evangelistic results. Even the Sanhedrin, Israel’s ruling elders, thought his face was “like the face of an angel.” They could not cope with the spirit of Stephen’s speech. Nevertheless, the Jewish religious leaders opposed Stephen and raise a riot against him

As believers, we shouldn’t go looking for trouble or try deliberately to provoke people. Neither should we apologize for our faith or withhold our witness just because people don’t like it. Jesus said if people hated Him, they will hate His followers as well.

b) Advancing the kingdom may result in suffering. Stephen’s vision of Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God in heaven was more than the Sanhedrin could stand. With vehement cries, they dragged Stephen out of the city and started throwing large stones at him to kill him. Following Jesus’ example, committing his spirit into the Lord’s hands, Stephen prayed God would forgive the men who were taking his life.

Word of new Christian martyrs rarely reaches the 6:00 news, but Christian organizations regularly share about global persecution. Hundreds of Christians are killed each year simply because they are followers of Jesus. Others are imprisoned. Several years ago, I met eleven leaders of national Baptist Unions in eastern Europe and Asia. Within a year, two of the eleven were put into prison on false charges as anti-Christian governments sought to stifle their witness.

We cannot let the possibility of suffering keep us from sharing our faith in Christ. If we suffer, let it be because we love Jesus and love people enough to tell them about Him.

3. Advancing the kingdom through faith-stretching strategy (Acts 8:1b, 8:4).

Satan's strategy to silence the church often backfires. The devil will use subtle wiles to destroy our witness. If that doesn't work, he often moves wicked people to persecute believers physically. With the killing of Stephen, a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. Although the apostles remained in Jerusalem, believers fled throughout Judea and Samaria. Perhaps Satan thought he had won the day.

Instead of being silenced, believers who were scattered preached the word everywhere they went. The gospel spread more widely, fulfilling Jesus's final commission for the church to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world (Acts 1:8). While ministering to some pastors in Siberia, I heard from a missionary that a large number of people throughout Siberia had been saved because of faithful witnesses who had been exiled from their homes in other parts of Russia. The Siberian people saw the gracious way these persecuted believers responded to suffering. As a result, they sought to know their Christ.

4. Advancing the kingdom through faith-inspired sacrifice (Acts 7:58b, 8:1a, 22:19-21).

- a) Faith-inspired sacrifice impacts other people.** As the people began to stone Stephen, the false witnesses against him "laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul." Saul not only agreed with Stephen's death, he became a leader of the persecution. Yet, Saul could not escape the Jesus of Stephen's faith. On the way to arrest believers in Damascus, Saul met Jesus personally and his life was forever transformed.

When we experience suffering and sacrifice for our faith, we should be aware of how our response impacts lost people. They are watching to see how we react. By courageous love and faith, we might see some of them come to Christ.

- b) Faith-inspired sacrifice leads others to share that suffering for Christ's sake.** Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher. After three missionary journeys, Paul found himself being assaulted by a mob because of his faith. He confessed to having gone into the synagogues to imprison people. He even had believers beaten. Part of Paul's testimony involved approving the death of Stephen. When Paul recalled Jesus's commission to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, the mob became enraged and tried to kill him. Eventually, at a trial, Paul appealed to Caesar for judgment. Little did he know that this

action, which led to his own martyrdom, would open the door for the gospel to penetrate Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22).

A friend visited a secret house church in China. During the service, police broke into the house and began beating the pastor in front of the small congregation. At first, my friend started to try and help but he was stopped by his Christian translator. The man told him not to rob the pastor of the honor of suffering for Christ's sake. We may never be arrested for our faith, but all believers will suffer some level of opposition. Will we be faithful or fearful? May we embrace even suffering that others might know Christ.

Conclusion: From Stephen to Paul to you and me, the baton of faith is constantly passed along. Sometimes it leads us along the path of suffering for Jesus's name. Sometimes it simply puts us into daily contact with friends, family, co-workers, and even strangers who need Christ. Let's not be like the lady who asked me to talk to her neighbor about Jesus because she didn't want to be embarrassed by doing so herself. Let's be like those faithful martyrs who have gone before us, willing to do what is necessary to advance Christ's kingdom.

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