



Acts (Part 5) – Better Than Life

Beau Hughes – March 9, 2014

[Video]

Female: In Jerusalem, AD 30, Jesus died on the cross, resurrected on the third day, and then ascended into heaven. Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles, giving them power, purpose, and a plan. Out of joy, the church was born. Empowered by the Spirit, Peter gave his first sermon, and 3,000 hearts were transformed. Hearing, receiving, and repenting, the young church walked in unity and garnered praise. Out of joy, the gospel creates community.

Peter and John continued to spread the gospel through preaching and miracles, and they were arrested and commanded not to teach about Jesus. But they refused, and the church multiplied by 5,000. Yet inside and outside forces threatened the unity of the church. When one couple held back money from the church body and denied it to Peter, God immediately struck them dead. Racial tension also began to surface, and the Hellenists accused the Hebrews of neglecting widows. This led the apostles to have the church choose seven men to serve and care for the congregation.

In every day and age, the church faces both persecution and praise. Christians will always be misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned, and the church will always be messy, because people are messy, yet God is at work in the mess. We must fight for and pray for unity. Instead of putting our wants and needs first, we should prefer our brothers and sisters above ourselves. When we do, unity and growth flourish within the church. Out of joy, the church multiplies.

[End of video]

Hello, friends. How are you? I feel like I should say to you and also to those of you in Dallas and Fort Worth, it's great to meet you. The majority of you I have not had the privilege of meeting. My name is Beau Hughes. I'm one of the pastors and elders here at The Village. My joy is to have the unique

privilege of overseeing with the others on our staff in Denton that little part of our flock that's crazy and fun and awesome called the Denton Campus.

I'm overjoyed to be here with you tonight and eager to jump right in where we are on the timeline and where the sermon series has been left off. That is Acts, chapter 6, if you're joining us new into the series. If you have a Bible, why don't you turn to Acts 6. While you're turning there, I also just want to say this on behalf of the Denton Campus. We're so thankful for your prayers.

I know most of you, at least those of you who are members of our church (if not all of you, hopefully), are aware of the potential transition and things that are going on and swirling around our campus. Over the last few months, we've really been the beneficiaries of your prayers. Even as the video just said, the significance and importance of unity, that God would actually kill people, that God would actually establish a certain office of leaders within the church to protect the unity, to facilitate and foster unity.

That's one of the primary prayers we've had as our campus, as we've looked ahead. We've said, "Hey, is this what the Lord has for us, transitioning and really taking a step of faith in multiplying out of The Village Church?" As we've done that, as we've prayed about that, unity has been on the forefront of our prayers, and the Lord has answered that so powerfully. So I just wanted to say thank you for your prayers. We covet them all the more as we continue to move forward and think about these things in these days.

Let me pray. I know we've already prayed, but let me just pray again that God's Spirit would really be here in a powerful way and that as we sit underneath God's Word... This is God's Word we're about to hear, that we're about to read. It's not just me up here talking and having a conversation with you; it's God speaking through his Word. That's what we believe as Christians. So as we do that, let's just pray that God would give us humble hearts and attentive ears to hear and respond to what he might say to us today.

Father, we are grateful that you are in charge of everything, even the headlines of the weekend of a plane that seemingly disappeared and wars and rumors of wars that rage on and injustice we see spread across the globe that seems to be unending, Lord, or even more close to home, probably, just the unique circumstances and situations in our lives that are causing us anxiety or discouragement today or just to be burdened. You are in charge of all of those things. You have given your Son all authority in heaven and on earth.

There could be no better news for us as your people tonight. As we approach your Word now humbly, as hearers and hopefully doers, we pray that by your Holy Spirit you would speak to us, change us. Let this Word be sharp like a double-edged sword and penetrate into the parts of our hearts we don't even know tonight we need to have exposed, we need to have comforted, and we need to have removed. So Spirit of God, be among us we pray, we ask, we need. We do ask all this in Jesus' name, amen.

We'll get to the book of Acts in just a minute, but I want to intro this by sharing a story with you. Last week I was studying and preparing for this sermon. I don't know how you study the Bible. One of the things I like to have close by, especially if I'm studying books of the Bible, is devotions, different study guides that will help lead me through whatever book of the Bible I'm studying.

A couple of years ago I actually studied the book of Acts on my own, personally, and had a couple of these study guides. I found one of them last week as I was preparing. I opened it up to the section we're in tonight, which is Acts 6:8 through Acts 7:60. That was the exact same way they had organized the book of Acts in the study. It was the same breakdown.

So I opened it up, and the very first question on the study guide was, "How do you respond to the possibility of dying because you were a follower of Jesus?" Like Stephen, who we're going to read about tonight. I don't know if you're like me, but when I look at old journals or even old yearbooks, or something, things I've written historically, I'm always nervous. I'm sort of embarrassed, even though I'm the only one reading it. It's like, "What did I say back then? That was so not awesome."

I knew I had filled this out, so I was really eager. I read the question. I was like, "Huh, I wonder what I wrote down as the answer." I looked at the answer, and I was just amazed at how awesome what I said was and how right on it was. This is actually what I wrote down. I said, "Honestly, I don't think about dying because I'm a follower of Jesus a whole lot, and when I do, it's so theoretical I don't feel like I can actually answer the question with honesty." That's what I had written down.

I think most of us here in the United States who are followers of Jesus would have to say in our more honest moments, unless we feel at some level called to go to dangerous places for world missions, that that's the case for us. Even though thousands upon thousands of Christians are martyred worldwide every year for their faith, even though an estimated 2.3 billion Christians, our

brothers and sisters whom Peter and others in the Bible would say we need to remember and pray for as if we're there with them in that persecution, in that jail, in that horrible situation...

Even though billions of them live in dangerous neighborhoods and contexts, for Christians in the United States (again, with the exception of those who feel called to go to these hard-to-reach places where people are martyred and persecuted for their faith), I just don't believe we can really imagine what it's like to die for our faith.

I don't think this is a bad thing, necessarily. I'm not trying to put any misplaced shame on you, that you need to feel bad about the fact you live in a country that has unbelievable freedoms that leave us not nervous at all about somebody coming in here and killing us because of what we're thinking about and talking about and singing about.

At the same time, I think it's helpful for us to pause and say, "When we really consider dying for our faith and how to respond to that possibility in our hearts and minds, we find it impossible, if not disingenuous, to actually answer that question." Again, I don't want you to feel bad for that. My point in all this is simply to say that for Christians in the US, in addition to asking the question, "How do you respond to the possibility of dying for Jesus?" it might actually be more helpful to ask, "Are we willing to *live* for Jesus?"

So just take a step back. We can talk about if you want to die for Jesus and be theoretical, but are you even willing to *live* for Jesus? Maybe even a step before that, more fundamentally, we could ask the question, "What *are* we living for, really?" which is really the question I want to ask tonight. If we were going to go to dinner after this service and I sat down and asked you, "What story, what driving narrative or vision in your life are you living for?" what would you say?

What's the story you're living for? What's the vision that's driving and compelling your life? You see, every one of us, Christian or non-Christian, young or old, black or white, educated, uneducated, is living our own life for a story, for a particular vision of the good life, and whatever story we're living for, whatever story we're living out of, shapes our lives. It shapes our pursuits. It shapes our identities. It shapes everything about us. What story are you living for?

Let me give you a few examples from culture to help you see how this plays itself out. I don't know if you've been following the trial of Oscar Pistorius. Pistorius, you may remember, was the Olympic sprinter from South Africa who had both of his legs amputated when he was 11 months old. Do you

remember the story? He's on trial now for murdering his girlfriend. The headline last week in the newspaper was, "Oscar Pistorius: His Entire Life Story On Trial."

The article said, "With his past triumphs now tarnished because he shot to death his girlfriend, Oscar Pistorius on Monday will enter court to be confronted with the jarring possibility that he will be sent to prison for at least 25 years." Here's his story. Here's the narrative of his life. "For the champion runner without legs, who trained himself to overcome all obstacles, nothing else matters now but beating the murder charge against him. Pistorius' family said Saturday that their focus is only on the trial. If found guilty, Pistorius' entire life story will be recast."

In these two paragraphs, implicitly, you have the concept that this is a story he was living out of. "I'm the double amputee who was a champion, an Olympic runner. I overcame all of the obstacles." Even if he didn't feel that way, this is what people viewed about his story. It's the idea that there is a story we're living out of. The crisis now is that life story is going to change, which means that identity is going to change, which means everything about that person that has been shaped by that story is going to change.

Let me give you another one. Rihanna. Some of you know Rihanna. Some of you don't. Maybe you should. She's a cultural icon, a big figure in the R&B and pop world. Five years ago this week, Rihanna's boyfriend, Chris Brown, almost beat her to death before the Grammy Awards. Five years ago, he was charged with a felony. He had rented a Lamborghini. They got in an argument. He beat her up, kicked her out of the car, left her on the side of the road to die, and then went on, and eventually they found him.

Of course, Hollywood just eats a story like that up, and so do we, sadly enough. We're intrigued. So there are all of these stories, all of these narratives. A couple of years after this, *Rolling Stone* did this incredible piece on her and her life, and it talked about her life story. One of the things it said, even from her mom, was that a big defining characteristic for Rihanna was she has always been a strong and independent woman. Always.

Of course, you see this, even after the incident, playing itself out with her response. These are her own words. After the incident she said, "I put my guard up so hard. I didn't want people to see me cry. I didn't want people to feel bad for me. It was a very vulnerable time in my life, and I refused to let that be the image." Her story is she's strong and independent. So even in a crushing moment like

this, to be weak, to put down her guard...she couldn't do that. "I wanted [people] to see me as, 'I'm fine, I'm tough.' I put that up until it felt real."

Here you're seeing, "This is my story, this is my identity, and now this is how it's going to shape my behavior. This is how it's going to shape my response to crisis." It says here it even began to shape the music she put out, the clothes she wore, and the smirk on her face. She says, "I put that up until it felt real." Then the author of the article said she actually adopted a permanent sneer and dressed in all black and released *Rated R* as her next CD, a collection of down-tempo tracks about murder and revenge.

Story, a vision of who you are, a vision of your own life...it drives us and shapes us. And it doesn't just shape individuals; it actually shapes organizations and institutions. Of course, those of you who are in marketing and advertising know this full well. Even those of us who work for organizations know this. Even organizations and institutions are driven by story.

This is an article from the March edition of the *Atlantic* magazine. It's actually an interesting article about fraternities. The cover of the *Atlantic* this month says, "The Fraternity Problem: It's Worse Than You Think." The article is called, "The Dark Power of Fraternities," by Caitlin Flanagan. By the way, if you're in a fraternity, if you have children who are in fraternities, or if you've ever thought about a fraternity, it would be an interesting article to read. Whether you agree with what she writes or not, it's really interesting. She brings up some good things in the article.

But she talks about colleges. She sort of backs out from the fraternities. She eventually gets there. She talks about the story of college institutions in general across the US. She writes, "The entire multibillion-dollar, 2,000-campus American college system...depends overwhelmingly for its very existence on one resource: an ever-renewing supply of fee-paying undergraduates.

It could never attract hundreds of thousands of them each year—many of them woefully unprepared for the experience, a staggering number (some 40 percent) destined never to get a degree, more than 60 percent of them saddled with student loans that they very well may carry with them to their deathbeds—if the experience [the story of the institution] were not accurately marketed as a blast."

"College is a blast," is what she's saying the story [the experience] is. Again, whether you agree with it or not (if you're part of an administration or institution, we'll talk later), this is what she's saying.

I'm just quoting this article. She says, "The kids arrive eager to hurl themselves upon the pasta bars and the climbing walls, to splash into the 12-person Jacuzzis and lounge around the outdoor fire pits, all of which have been constructed in a blatant effort to woo them away from competitors.

They swipe prepaid cards in dormitory vending machines to acquire whatever tanning wipes or earbuds or condoms or lube or energy drinks the occasion seems to require. And every moment of the experience is sweetened by the general understanding that with each kegger and rager, each lazy afternoon spent snoozing on the quad (a forgotten highlighter slowly drying out on the open pages of *Introduction to Economics*, a Coke Zero sweating beside it), they are actively engaged in the most significant act of self-improvement available to an American young person: college!"

This is the story of the institution. Every college tells this story in their own way. I live up in Denton. Our church meets right across the street from UNT. Go Mean Green. Love the Mean Green. Love that institution. The way *they* tell the story is that UNT is a "green light to greatness." That's their slogan. That's the story they're telling. "UNT is your 'green light to greatness.'" I think it's a great slogan. I remember it. You remember it now. Maybe you'll go to UNT. That would be awesome. See you soon.

The idea is that even institutions are living out of a story, and even entire nations have stories they're living for. You may actually have heard of ours. The American story, the American dream: your entitlement to life, liberty, and, above all, the pursuit of personal happiness regardless of the cost. Every individual, every organization, every culture, is living their life in light of a story, their particular vision of what matters most in this life.

Whatever story you and I are living for, whatever narrative or vision of the good life that drives us, that has so captured our hearts it compels us and shapes us in every way and ultimately controls us... As Rebecca Pippert once wrote in one of her books a long time ago, whatever controls us is actually our lord. None of us control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives. Whatever lord controls our lives is who or what you and I are not only living for but also that which we're willing to die for.

Again, you hear this in culture all the time. My wife and I were recently watching the Lance Armstrong documentary. You don't even have to watch the whole documentary, just the trailer. This is what the trailer says in its opening line. This is quoting Lance Armstrong. If you don't know who he is, he was a cyclist. He was really good, and then we found out he cheated. He's still really good, but he cheated, so he's not that good anymore.

Anyway, this is what he said. "I like to win, but more than anything I can't stand the idea of losing, because to me that equals death." That's lordship language. You tie death to anything, that's lordship language. You don't even have to watch the whole documentary. Just watch the trailer. The trailer says the gift Lance Armstrong had was that he was a gifted storyteller.

It says the story he told and that people loved to believe about his life was he was a cancer survivor (that's true) who overcame the disease and came back and won because he was a champion, because of his hard work and his grit and his toughness. That he was a champion. We bought it hook, line, and sinker. This was the story he told about himself, believed about himself, and was willing to lie for, cheat for, and even, if need be, die for. He was controlled by the story, the lord of his life.

It's not just athletes. We can pick on athletes. Funny guy Jimmy Fallon... Some of you like Jimmy. He said in an interview a number of years ago, "I remember saying to myself, 'If I don't make it on *Saturday Night Live* before I'm 25, I'm going to kill myself.'" That's a controlling, shaping vision, story, desire. He casually confessed that one night. He said, "It's crazy. I had no other plan. I didn't have friends. I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't have anything going on. I had my career and that was it."

What Fallon and Armstrong and any other person we'd want to pick out from these articles in culture are simply confessing is a sentiment of heart all of us live with. We have a story. We have a vision. It has captured our hearts, and if we don't get it, we don't know what to do with ourselves. For some of us even, if we don't get it, we're willing to kill ourselves. We're willing to go to great lengths to say, "I have to have this so much, this is so controlling in my life, if I don't get it, I don't want to be alive."

We could go through narrative after narrative after narrative. I think the hard part, though, is to quit looking at the celebrities and look at our own hearts. If all this is true, if all of us have a story, if all of us have a lord that controls us and shapes us and shapes everything about us, the question for us tonight is...*How can we really know what or who is controlling us?* How can we really know the story or the lord of our lives, who that or what that really is?

There's a book that has a number of good questions. I just want to read these questions to you. They won't tell you an answer, but they'll help you and me really discern our hearts. If you're taking

notes, I'd encourage you not to write these down. If you want these questions, you can email Janet Chandler. She'll send you the whole sermon manuscript. I'd just like for you to listen to these questions and think about them. Think about who or what is controlling your life. What's the story you're living out of? Who's the lord of that story?

Here's the first question: Early on in your conversations with people, in your relationships, what do you want to make sure people know about you? That's a great question. In those first five minutes, that thing you're just itching to let them know about yourself. You just have to put this out because this is so central to your identity. It's probably not a bad thing. Even the good things. What's the thing you want people to know about you right up front, that you just have to lead out with that foot?

What preoccupies you? What do you daydream about? When you're alone, where does your mind go effortlessly? One person once said that what a man does in his solitude is really his religion. What makes you feel the most self-worth? What are you the most proud of in your life, in your past? For what do you want to be known?

What if you failed at it or lost it would actually cause you, as Lance Armstrong and Jimmy Fallon demonstrated, to feel like you wouldn't even want to be alive? If you lost this thing or failed at this thing, you wouldn't even want to keep living, because that thing is so significant to you, so shaping, so central to your identity or your life.

What do you worry about the most? Another way to ask this question is if you want to know what's really controlling your life, look at your nightmares. What do you worry about? What do you get balled up with anxiety about? What do you look to for comfort when things go badly or get difficult? What goal or desire unreachd would seriously make you think about turning away from God?

These are really helpful questions to get at the heart of what the driving narrative and true lord of our lives really is. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones (he was a preacher in England a long time ago) once said, the true lord of your life, the driving narrative, the story you're living out of, is anything that holds such a controlling position in your life or mine that it moves and rouses and attracts us so easily that we give our time, our attention, our energy, and our money to it effortlessly. We don't even think about it.

What we're going to see in Acts 6-7 tonight, through the life and example of Stephen, is a beautiful and forceful witness of the one Story and the one Lord who is ultimately worth living and, if need be, dying for. We have a front row seat, church, to God's vision of the good life, to the story of the Lord who is better than any other; indeed, who's even better than life itself.

If you're in Acts 6, let's pick it up where we left off last week. Matt finished with Acts, chapter 6, verse 7. I want to pick it up there, because it's a good summary sentence. There are these summary sentences all through the book of Acts. After the Ananias and Sapphira incident, after the unity has been protected in the church, Acts 6:7 says, "**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem...**"

If you're wondering where we get the subtitle for the series, "Out of joy the church multiplies," we didn't make it up because it was a cute slogan; it's in the Bible. Multiplication. It's a good thing. Gospel-centered multiplication. It's what's happening in the church as God is protecting them and they're staying unified and they're loving and caring for each other. "**...and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**"

Then look at verse 8: "**And Stephen...**" I just want to stop here. The word *and* lets us know there are some dots we should connect about Stephen's life and death that I think are easy to pass over. In other words, Luke didn't throw Stephen's story in here as just a random, inspiring, bonus story, like, "Oh, here's a good place to put a story of a martyr. That would be awesome." No. Stephen's life and death are intricately connected to the overall story the book of Acts is teaching and talking about, the history Luke is recounting.

Matt is going to talk about this next week, but Stephen's life and death are actually a pivot point in the entire narrative of Acts. Acts, chapter 1, verse 8, that we're going to be witnesses to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That's the gospel and God's people multiplying from this outhouse in Galilee to the White House in Rome. That's the story. The "And Stephen" here helps us go, "Oh, Stephen's life is connected to that story. It's not random. It's not a filler story." Stephen's life is fundamental to the story that's being told in the book of Acts. Again, Matt is going to cover that a lot more next week. Verse 8 says:

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and

disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

So this picture we get of Stephen... We know from earlier in the chapter that he's of good repute, that he's full of wisdom in the Spirit, but here in verses 8-10 we see he's doing great signs and wonders, that he's such a powerful proclaimer and witness of Jesus Christ they don't know what to do with him.

Let me just say this. Stephen is not just a martyr. He was a powerful leader in the church when he was alive. In other words, he's not the Forrest Gump of the Bible. It's not like he was sort of an outcast, and then all of a sudden he was good at football and everybody loved him, that Stephen was sort of this nobody and then all of a sudden he got martyred and he became central. No. Before he got killed he was a powerful leader. He was a figurehead among the seven.

His witness, his life, was unbelievably powerful. It even reminds you some of Jesus. The same things that happened to Jesus happened to Stephen again and again. One of those is that his ministry was so powerful that his critics became so frustrated they went behind the scenes, and in verse 11 it says, **"Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'"**

They bring up false witness. **"And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him..."** Listen to this mob scene. They grab Stephen because they're mad because they don't know how to talk to him in a way that makes them look better than him. They seize him and bring him before the council and set up false witnesses.

"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.' And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

That's a weird little verse. It sort of brings to mind Moses after he met with God or even Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. They stirred up false witnesses, and here are the accusations they brought against Stephen based on this text. Basically that he was speaking against these four holy centers of Israel's faith: that he was blaspheming God (verse 11), that he was speaking about Moses (verse 11), the law, and the temple.

These are big deals to speak about in the nation of Israel at this time. These are the big, big, big central pieces of their story that they're living out of. They're saying Stephen is blaspheming. Again, the accusations are eerily similar to the ones brought against Jesus. As it were, Jesus is actually back on trial in Jerusalem through the life of Stephen. It's pretty fascinating to think about. The charges of Stephen, just like Jesus, are blasphemy, teaching a different religion, teaching a different lord and a different story of salvation.

The high priest hears this... Again, this is the supreme court. This isn't like the district judge. This is the supreme court of the nation he's standing before. **"And the high priest said, 'Are these things so?'"** I don't know what kind of movies you like. I love me some good courtroom dramas. It doesn't matter that I know how the movie is going to end. I love it. I love the rhetorical flourishes at the end and the seemingly impossible, the case being overturned.

Let me just give you some. Maybe I can hit some generations here. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Yeah, you old people like that one. *A Few Good Men*. A little bit more recent. That's what's crazy being in Denton with the college students. If *A Few Good Men* was like your prime, you're old. You quote that movie and people just look at you like, "I wasn't born yet. I don't know who Jack Nicholson is." *The Hurricane* with Denzel Washington. Anything with Denzel. Denzel is my guy. *The Lincoln Lawyer*. That's for you younger generation. I love these courtroom dramas.

What you have in Acts, chapter 7, is one of the best courtroom scenes in the history of the world. They drag this guy full of power and wisdom and accuse him of something that's false, and his response is brilliant, so brilliant we're not actually going to read the whole thing in its entirety. I want you to do this, though. In chapter 7, verses 2-50, you see Stephen's response, his defense, and it's in the form of a sermon.

He takes the accusations against him and preaches a sermon where he takes the salvation story of Israel found in our Old Testament... This is what the driving storyline of those who are accusing him is. He takes the story they're living out of and shows them how they've actually gotten their own story wrong because they've misunderstood Jesus.

It's brilliant what he does. He tells them, "You're actually the ones who are living out of the wrong story. You're actually the blasphemous ones, because you, just like your forefathers before you, have rejected the true Lord." That's the essence of his sermon. We don't have time to walk through

all this, but I want you with your group, with your spouse, with your friendship circle, to read this. I'll just touch the high points for you.

He starts with Abraham, because Abraham is the start of God's people, the nation of Israel. He talks about the patriarchs and Joseph. He talks about Moses, he talks about the law, and he ends by talking about the temple. He talks about the very things he's being accused of speaking against, and he recounts to them their story of salvation in such a way that points out to his accusers that because of their misunderstanding and rejection of Jesus, they have actually misunderstood their own story. It's brilliant. It is a brilliant scene.

In essence, Stephen's defense in his sermon is, "Because I understand Jesus, I understand your story better than you do." That's what he tells them. "Because I understand that Moses pointed us toward Jesus [verse 37], because I understand that Jesus is the true fulfillment of the law [verses 38 and 53], because I understand that Jesus and now us as his people are the true temple of God where heaven and earth meet [verse 48], I'm the one who's actually living in accord with the story of Israel and her God and you are not." *Bam!* Put *that* in a movie. It's unbelievable.

Don't miss the drama of the moment for us, because what Stephen is telling these religious leaders is something that's still very relevant and confrontational for you and me right now. He's saying the story we're living for, whatever it is (in their case it was the story of the Old Testament), is incomplete and, therefore, misshaped and the wrong story without Jesus as the center of it. That was true for them and it's true for our stories as well.

So hear me, church. If the story you are living for, whether it's religious or irreligious (the sobering thing is they were living for an extremely religious story), does not have Jesus as the center and Lord of it, it is a misshaped and wrong story. It's not the story to live for. It's not the lord to live for. One of the responsibilities we have as a community of faith (I'm speaking to those of you who are Christians, especially those of you who are a part of this church as members) is to actually encourage and exhort one another, generally and day by day, to keep Jesus as the Lord and center of our stories.

This is what we should be doing all the time in our relationships. This is what we should be doing all the time in our groups, in our marriages, in our friendships. Is Jesus the center of your story, generally and day by day? Stay-at-home moms, how is Jesus the story of your daily routine? My wife

is a stay-at-home mom with three little kids, so she knows what this is like. I pray for her in this. How is he the center of the story of your daily routine?

Students, how does Jesus transform your college narrative from what we just read about earlier to something that's more significant and meaningful? Empty nesters, what does Jesus have to say about your finally quiet house? Retirees, what does it look like and mean for Jesus to be at the center of your retirement plan? For all of us who have jobs, how does Jesus connect to your vocation? How do your faith and your work integrate if you're an entrepreneur, if you're an athlete, if you're an accountant, an artist, or a musician?

Newlyweds, what does it look like? Singles, what does it look like? How does Jesus transform and dominate the storyline of your singleness? Isn't that what Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 7, that Jesus should dominate the storyline of your singleness? Is that happening? Even those of you who are commuters, how does Jesus take the horror story that is the commute on I-35 and redeem it and transform it? How does that work in your car, in your commute? That's a daily story some of you live by. So on and on.

Church, in general and day by day, is Jesus the center of your story? Is he your Lord? If not, our stories and our lives, no matter how religious, will be misshaped. These are conversations we should have with one another all the time, especially because we can't see where our stories are misshaped and where we start serving other lords. We need other people who are Christians and understand these things to help us.

If you're not a Christian, let me just speak to you for a moment. Every one of us, you included, was made to look to a story and to a lord for meaning, for rescue, for love, for purpose, for freedom. This is what the Bible calls *salvation*. But the story you're made for is not a story with you or your own desires at the center of it. This is what Stephen would say. This is what the Bible testifies. Unless Jesus Christ is the center of your story, you'll never find a happy ending. This is what the Bible says.

That's why, as Christians, we're the most joy-filled people, because we know that by God's grace. I know some of you are not Christians. You don't need me to tell you that. That's the reason you're here. You're looking for a different story because the one you've been living out of has left you restless. You've gotten all you set out to get and you're not satisfied. You're here tonight because you're actually looking for a different story. You're looking for a different lord.

Stephen would say Jesus is that Lord. He's the one who completes all of our stories. He's the only one who's worthy of our trust and our following, the only one who treats us like he will. No other lords love us like Jesus. They enslave us. They burden us. They leave us empty and dry and anxious. So through his sermon, Stephen completely flips the accusations against him on their head, and in a not-so-subtle way that'll get him killed, he accuses his accusers of the very thing he's standing trial for.

His courtroom defense is, "You are actually the ones who have destroyed the temple. You're the ones who have disobeyed the law. You're the ones who have changed the message of Moses, and by killing Jesus, you're the ones...you, not me...just like your ancient forefathers, who have not only blasphemed God but actually murdered his Son." He says this plainly in verses 51-53. **"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit."**

All of this language is taken from the prophets. "Stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart, resistant, stubborn." This is the same message of the prophets. He says, **"As your fathers did..."** Which is what he says in the sermon. **"...so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."**

He finishes with a call to repentance. This isn't just Stephen puffing out his chest in the middle of the courtroom and wagging his finger, saying, "You've all just missed it. You're idiots." There are underlying tones here of, "You're missing it, just like your forefathers. They rebelled against God. He gave them a second chance." Implicit in Stephen's response here is, "So come back to the Lord. You're being disobedient. Quit resisting the Spirit of God. Quit being stiff-necked. Quit being stubborn of heart. Come back."

This is Stephen being gracious. He's calling them to repentance in love. He has actually turned his accusations into a call for repentance. Sadly, Stephen's appeal here does not lead his accusers to repentance. It doesn't humble them to see that because they've rejected and murdered Jesus they're living out of a misshaped story. It actually just enrages them all the more. In verses 54-60 we see the response.

"Now when they heard these things..." They didn't repent. They didn't humble themselves.

"...they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed

into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." I know that might seem random, but Jesus in his own trial said, "Listen, I'm going to be at the right hand of the Father."

What Stephen sees is a validation that Jesus is who he says he is. More than that, what he sees is a picture of Jesus next to the Father, ruling and reigning with all authority as the Judge. As he's being mistreated and judged wrongly, you know who's really the Judge overseeing the whole thing? His Lord. How encouraging for those who are being persecuted.

Even if you're not being persecuted. Your life is in shambles. There are circumstances you can't control. To be able to look up and know that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father and all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him. One day, somehow, someway, this Lord, this Judge, this Righteous One who died for our trespasses, will make things right; he will make the crooked straight.

So even as we're seeing a crooked story, Stephen is looking up, and he sees Jesus and knows he's reigning. How encouraging. He says what he says, and you know what? The people who were accusing him knew they were judged in that moment, because their response to that vision is this: **"But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him."**

I know that's just one sentence. That's a horrible sentence. I've been to the place in Jerusalem where he was stoned. I've seen it. They dragged him out. In these times, there were actually ways they stoned people that were more humane, more organized. This is not an organized stoning. This is an enraged mob. They just pulled him out of the city and stoned him.

"And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul." We'll talk about him in the days ahead. "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

At this moment, as Matt will talk about next week, we have a turning point in the book of Acts, because Stephen's murder will be the catalyst for the church multiplying and scattering out as they become persecuted more and more. Because of Stephen and how the Lord used him and the

persecution that followed, the gospel will go out to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Matt will get into that next week.

Let's just conclude by thinking about Stephen's life and death and what it teaches us. What it teaches us is that there's only one story, the gospel, and there's only one Lord who's really worth living and dying for. Is that the story you're living out of? Is Jesus your Lord? As heroic and as inspiring as Stephen's death is, I think sometimes we can go overboard as Christians.

It's cool to get excited and to go, "Man, this guy is a hero; we should celebrate it." Yeah, we should, in the sense that God was faithful to him and sustained him to the end, but it's important and critical that we remember Stephen wasn't the real hero. Stephen is just following the example of the true Hero, the very Lord he lived and died for, Jesus of Nazareth. We see this all throughout the story, in case you missed it.

Like Stephen, Jesus was filled with the Spirit and had a ministry of unrivaled wisdom and authority. Like Stephen, Jesus was accused of blasphemy before God. Like Stephen, Jesus was given an unjust trial and refuted his accusers with power and wisdom. Like Stephen, Jesus was led out of the city and executed in an excruciating and horrendous way: crucifixion. Like Stephen, Jesus, as he was being crucified, as he was being murdered, prayed for forgiveness for the very ones who were murdering him. Stephen is just following Jesus' example.

Yet Jesus' death is fundamentally unlike Stephen's or anybody else's, because, unlike Stephen and any other hero who has died for a good cause along the way in history, Jesus didn't just die, as Gandhi once said, to be a good example. Jesus' death was substitutionary, and he bought and purchased more than just a good example. Jesus died to save us from sin. Jesus is the true Lord who died so we could have our lives that are lived for lesser lords and lesser stories saved. He came to save us. He died to save us from the lesser lords we worship and the lesser stories we live for.

Jesus is utterly unique. He gave his life to make a way for you and me to be forgiven of our sins, our stiff necks, our resistance to the Holy Spirit. In his grace, he died to make a way for us to finally be set free from the tyranny of the misshaped stories and false lords that control our lives and ultimately don't satisfy us, because they can't. He made a way for us to live within his story, a story with him as our Lord and our Savior and our God.

Jesus himself once said it this way: **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world..."** What does it profit us if we gain whatever our misshaped stories and false lords are promising us and yet forfeit our souls, our very lives? It doesn't profit us anything.

Ultimately, the rejection of Stephen was a re-rejection of Jesus. That's what this whole passage is about. The call for us today, like Stephen's call to those who accused him and murdered him, is the same: to not reject Jesus again by giving ourselves over to a misshaped story and a false lord. So if Jesus isn't your Lord, if you're not living out of the story of his gospel, if you have a false lord or a false story, the invitation is to deny your other lords, to forsake that story, and to transfer your hope and trust in your salvation from whatever else you're living for besides Jesus to him.

He stands ready to save us today. He stands ready to receive us. He loves us and says, "Come, follow me. Come join the story I have purchased for you, and let me be the Lord I already am over you, whether you realize it or not. Come see, like Stephen learned, that my steadfast love is better than even life."

Father, we pray that you would give us the grace we need to see the other lords we worship and let control our lives, to see the very stories we're living for and living out of that are misshaped and, therefore, leading us horribly astray, that we'd see it and that you would help us to repent, to transfer our hope and our trust for salvation from those lords and stories to you.

Thank you that you love us, that you didn't just leave us here to live lives blown about by false lords, but you came and showed us you *are* the Lord, the true Lord who loves his people. We thank you for Stephen. We thank you for the grace you exhibited in his life and all that he calls us to now from your Word, 2,000 years later, as we hear these words he preached echo in our own hearts. Lord, lead us into repentance. Teach us how to deny and forsake our other lords that we might follow you and really find our lives. We ask in Jesus' name, amen.