We Can Be Heroes
Acts 6:5-8:4

We can be heroes if we'll follow the example of Stephen. Ask God to do WHATEVER IT TAKES to grow you in faith, obedience, wisdom, grace, and courage so that you can live a heroic life that changes the world for the better.

My kids love superheroes, but I have sad news for my kids... they are never going to be superheroes. Because superheroes... aren't like us... not regular people
- To be a superhero must be:
  o chosen by magic hammer or injected with Super-Soldier serum
  o bitten by a radioactive spider or inherit 100 billion dollars
- That’s not going to happen to any of us – we live ordinary lives
- Most of us have resigned ourselves to that sad reality

The problem: most of us have allowed that same logic to infect our spiritual lives!
- see heroic men and women in the Bible who changed the world & history for the better
- Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Peter... Ruth, Esther, Mary
- we admire them, revere them... but assume we could never become like them
- for centuries the church has venerated its saints rather than trying to become saints
  o Here’s the tomb of St James the Apostle martyred in Acts 2
    ▪ remains said to lie in this coffin in Cathedral of Santiago in Spain
    ▪ last year: 200,000+ people walked 100km “Way of Saint James” to venerate
- we put great saints & martyrs on pedestals – assume we could never be like them

My fear: we’ll do that this morning as we look at the first martyr of the church: Stephen
- so impressed with his character, in awe of his courage, assume we could never be like him

So here’s my big idea: there is NOTHING superhuman about Stephen in this story
- he doesn’t have special powers you don’t have
- he’s not some higher class of Christian than you

Stephen is just a regular believer like us
who allows the Spirit, whom we all have
to do extraordinary things through him

We don’t need to venerate saints and martyrs
- because saints & martyrs aren’t any different than the rest of us
- just ordinary believers who allowed God to do extraordinary things through them
- just like He can do through us.

So if any of us can be heroes of the faith that begs the question: How do we become heroic men and women according to the Word of God?

Let’s find out by getting to know our hero – Stephen – read 6:1-5a
- There’s a crisis of disunity in the early church
  o Hellenistic Jewish widows neglected
  o Background: debate in Judaism – should we adopt aspects of Greek culture?
  - Not a big deal – no bearing on the church – like guitars vs. pianos in worship
  - But it had become a source of disunity
    - 2 sides competed for influence in early church
    - Hebraic Jews were majority so they neglected needs of Hellenistic Jews
- Elders decide to appoint group of Hellenistic Jewish believers to oversee $ to widows
- And one of those men is named Stephen
  - A Hellenistic Jew who became a Christian
  - Most important thing about Stephen: v5 “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”

Pre-requisite for becoming a hero: You must be full of faith and the Spirit
- Pre-reqs: classes you have to take before you can take other classes
- Pre-reqs for becoming a hero of the Christian faith = you’ve got to become a Christian!
- And we become Christians through faith and the Spirit… Ephesians 1:13
  - The moment you believe the Gospel...the good news that Jesus died...
- The moment you believe the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you forever
  - seals you as part of God’s family – you are a Christian from that moment on
- But Luke saying more than just “he was a Christian” – he was FULL of faith & Spirit
  - didn’t simply believe the gospel, become a Christian, then get back to normal life
  - Stephen grew in faith and in the Spirit till they filled every part of his life
- That’s what sets heroic Christians apart: they never stop growing in faith & Spirit
  - If you’ve trusted Jesus for eternal life – great!
  - but now will you trust Jesus with your marriage... finances... job... health... kids...?
  - Will you surrender more of your life to Jesus to do with it as He sees fit?
- That’s not easy!
  - No 3-step process for growing in faith – it’s hard and takes a LONG TIME!
  - I still have lots of growth ahead when it comes to faith
    - I assume I’ve trusted Jesus with some part of my life – e.g. finances
    - then something goes wrong – AC brakes and will cost multiple 1000’s
    - I get angry, stressed... realize I STILL haven’t fully trusted Jesus with $.
      - it’s His money – He’s sovereign over my bank account and AC
    - so I should not be getting angry about this
  - but I do because I don’t yet fully trust Him with my life – got a long ways to go!
- So what do you do to grow in faith and in the Spirit?
  - Humbly ask God to help you - only He can grow faith!
    - faith is not something you can manufacture – can’t just turn on a switch
  - Pray every day: “God please do WHATEVER IT TAKES to grow me in faith”
    - = submission – “Jesus take everything in my life and do as you see fit”
- Pray that every day for 30 years and you’ll be a little further along!
- The more we learn to trust Jesus, the more His Spirit will accomplish in us and through us
  If you will grow in faith then the Spirit will develop heroic strengths in you like He did in Stephen’ Strengths like...

1. Heroic obedience
   - 6:3 – “good reputation”
     - someone who is well-spoken of in the community because of the godly life they’ve lived
   - Stephen had consistently obeyed God and done what is right
     - so even his enemies had to admit, “The guy is faultless.”
   - That’s why when his enemies try to get him in trouble, what do they have to do?
     - read 6:13a
     - nothing legit they can hang on him – so they have to turn to lies
Heroic people live consistently obedient lives
- must be “above reproach, blameless” in the eyes of the world

Are you “above reproach”?
- If someone asked a classmate, coworker, neighbor about you what would they say?
  - blameless, a genuinely good person
- OR… “He’s got quite a mouth”… “She’s a gossip”… “selfish”… “rude”… “a flirt”
- You can’t be a hero in God’s family if your life is not above reproach

Junior High band trip
- I got made fun of a lot – small, not popular, a Christian so I never fought back
  - I got so tired of the ridicule… I got so angry
  - So I struck back – I can be sarcastic when I want to be
    - raked a couple guys over the coals – said horrible but funny things
    - said words I don’t ever want my kids to even hear – shocked people
    - but it got everyone laughing at someone other than me
    - felt really good for a moment – revenge always does
- But the next morning I felt so guilty
  - traded my good reputation for a few minutes of revenge
  - how could I be a witness to guys I’d ridiculed the day before?!
  - SCARY: you can spend years building a godly reputation only to ruin it in a moment

Our public behavior either makes us a hero or a villain for the gospel
- That night I was the villain – I gave into temptation and hurt reputation of Christ

Since then I’ve prayed:
- “God keep me from bringing harm through my actions to the name of Jesus
  - Do WHATEVER IT TAKES to make me a man of good reputation in this community

I encourage you to pray like that
- pray that God would redeem your reputation in the community
- pray that He would do whatever it takes to keep you “above reproach”

If you see areas of sin in your life – immorality, drunkenness, cursing, gossip…
- confess it to the Lord, admit it’s wrong, pray for victory
- Get help from friends to turn your life around

rest of the strengths the Spirit developed in Stephen are listed starting in v8...Read 6:8-10

2. Heroic wisdom

v3 and v10: Stephen was full of wisdom
- = sophia = “ability to understand truth and put it into practice”

He understood the truth so well that none of his opponents could refute him
- Jews who did not believe in Jesus tried to prove him wrong but couldn’t

Where did Stephen get that wisdom?… look at chapter 7
- Stephen is falsely accused of blasphemy… so they drag him to court
  - read 7:2-6
    - no time to prepare defense – no notes – not even allowed a Bible!
    - he just stands up and begins to speak with incredible clarity and wisdom
      - he walks them thru 2000 years of Jewish history from memory
      - to show that he’s not the one who’s rejected God… they are!
    - to prove his point he quoted the Old Testament from memory 15 times by my count
      - quotes word for word from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Amos
      - how many of us know Amos by heart?!
    - Stephen knew scripture by heart! That’s what made him wise.

To be a hero of the faith you must become wise by saturating your mind in scripture
So I want you to honestly answer a few questions – may be a little convicting:
  o Do you spend more time in God’s Word than on Facebook or Instagram?
  o Which have you memorized more of: scripture or football stats?
  o Do you spend more time studying God’s Word or listening to podcast preachers?
- If you want to live a heroic life you must spend lots of time in this book – read, study, memorize

3. Heroic grace
  - read v8a - “full of grace and power”
  - When we think about heroes in our culture...we think about “power” but not “grace”
    o “grace” or “gracious” = give good to someone who deserves harm
    o = forgive your enemies; bless those who try to hurt you
    o that’s not what heroes do in the movies – imagine Batman hugging the Joker...
  - That’s not what American heroes do... but it is what biblical heroes do
    o Read 7:2a
      ▪ the men who are lying about him – dragged him to court – want to kill him
      ▪ he calls them “brothers, fathers” – respect; grace! He is kind to them
    o Continues to the end... Read 7:58-60
      ▪ they kill Stephen because of his allegiance to Jesus – kill him in a PAINFUL way
      ▪ yet his last word: “Father forgive these men... who are killing me!”
      ▪ That’s heroic grace – just like Jesus prayed as He hung on the cross
  - And I want you to see the power of that heroic grace in one little detail... v58
    o who was watching the coats of the Sanhedrin as they stoned Stephen? SAUL
    o he will meet Jesus in 2 chapters – become greatest missionary in history
    o I can’t help but think the reason God saved Paul... is because of Stephen’s prayer!
      ▪ his grace helped saved Paul who brought salvation all the way to Rome
    o According to our culture: strength = hero crushing villain
    o True strength is so much greater = hero transforming villain into a new hero
      ▪ through GRACE!
  - show respect to those who ridicule you, forgive those who hurt you...
  - and God will use you to transform villains into heroes – sinners into saints

4. Heroic courage
  - What kind of person comes to mind when you think about courage? Chuck Norris!
    o the internet’s favorite action hero
    o I love Chuck Norris memes. Here’s a few of my favorites...

There is no theory of evolution, just a list of creatures Chuck Norris has allowed to live
Chuck Norris: his tears cure cancer. Too bad he has never cried...
Chuck Norris died 20 years ago, Death just hasn't built up the courage to tell him
If you spell Chuck Norris in Scrabble, you win. Forever.
Chuck Norris is never late....time is just early.

- The internet version of Chuck Norris is invincible
  o He knows he’ll win – bad guy knows Chuck will win – everybody knows!
- That’s not actually courage
  o doesn’t take courage to stand up to evil when you know you’ll win
- Real courage requires vulnerability
  o courage stands against evil even when you know you could lose & get hurt
- That’s the courage Stephen demonstrates
  o He knew he could get hurt – just a regular guy
  o didn’t have $ or connections or massive biceps to get him out of trouble
- But look at the courage he shows…
  - draws overview of Old Testament history to a close with this bombshell… read 7:51-53
  - DANGEROUS thing to say to a group of men who have the power to kill you
- Stephen speaks truth with courage… and it costs him his life read 7:54-57
- He was the first church martyr… but certainly not the last
  - Believers are still dying for their faith – remember what ISIS did to 21 Christians
  - It can even happen here in the US as it happened in Oregon this week
  - Stephen’s sacrifice is being repeated daily around the world
- Most of us won’t lose our lives… but we will pay a price if we’re courageous for Jesus
- For many of us it’s likely to cost us our reputation
  - we live in an academic community that respects intellect
  - many of you are brilliant – just as smart as Stephen
    - students, faculty, doctors, professionals – respected for your mind
  - but… you believe in a religion that’s not well thought of in academic world
    - believe in ridiculous things like miracles, resurrection, hell, abstinence
    - things that will get you laughed out of the university
  - will you stay faithful even when it costs you your reputation, respect?
  - are you willing to be thought a fool for Christ? am I?
    - I struggle with this one – take pride in my intellect
    - am I willing to be thought a fool, gullible, naïve because of my faith?
  - many of us would rather lose an arm than lose the respect and reputation we have

Are we courageous enough to be regarded as fools for Jesus? THAT IS SO HARD!

Let’s find strength to be courageous by looking at the results of Stephen’s death
- read 8:1,4
- Before Acts 7 all the Christians were huddled in Jerusalem
- Stephen’s heroic death changed everything!
  - persecution forced most believers out of Jerusalem
  - but they were inspired by Stephen and so they went preaching Jesus!
  - Stephen’s courage inspired thousands of new witnesses for Jesus

Stephen was just an ordinary believer like us
  who relied on the Spirit we all have
  to do extraordinary things that changed the world and the course of history

God can do the same through us.
WE CAN BE HEROES – just like Stephen… if we’ll follow his example
- Will you trust God like Stephen did – with your relationships, money, career, health…?
- Will you obey like Stephen did – will you live “above reproach”?
- Will you pursue wisdom in God’s Word – read it, study it, memorize it?
- Will you show grace and forgiveness to people who hurt you?
- Will you courageously share faith even when it costs you reputation, friends, money?

Here’s a way to start being a hero for Jesus… when you came in this morning: CARD
- My 3 People & 1 Place
  - 3 people you know who don’t yet know Jesus
  - one nation or group you care about and want to see reached with the Gospel
- On the back – write a friends list – pray for both
It’s hard to take a courageous stand for Jesus – it will cost you
But it’s worth it because Jesus took a stand for us
- He stood up and took our punishment, guilt, shame – He took it all in our place
- He died and rose for us so we could be forgiven and have life
- Give thanks to God for sending Jesus to stand up for you
- Ask God to do whatever it takes in your life to make you a hero like Stephen
- Submit your life to Him just like Stephen did