

THE BIG IDEA: When we stand for Jesus, Jesus stands for us.

The Take-Off

For the last few months we've been riding a roller coaster through the book of Acts and we've been asking one simple question: "What could happen today if we simply followed the lead of Someone far greater than us?"

We've not been trying to make people do what we see in Acts as much as we've simply been observing what they did and asking what would happen today if we did what they did then.

We've seen the early church go from good time to bad times and back to good times again.

It has been quite an up and down ride, and if we're learning anything, perhaps we're learning that if we weather the hard times, quite a bit of good can be accomplished for the kingdom of God.

The resounding theme in Acts so far? "Don't give up."

In fact, the only people who die on roller coasters are the ones who jump off. So don't jump off.

Today, we'll see another sudden downturn followed by an upturn, and it all happens because someone takes a stand for Jesus.

What we're going to see is that when we stand for Jesus, three very important things happen:

1. Others will oppose us. (Acts 6:8-15)

Guess what? When we try to do something good, most people are more than willing to make it harder for us!

We all know this is true because we've all experienced it!

Christians, atheists, regular church attenders and non church goers. Belief in Jesus isn't required in order to agree on the fact that others are often more willing to pull us down than to lift us up

Stephen experienced this in Acts 6

Verse 8 says he did great things, and then verse 9 says that "opposition arose"

Every success story has this in it somewhere - "I had a dream, someone tried to stop me" (Demotivator pic)

This is why 1 Peter 4:12 is so critical - we've got to prepare and expect opposition. Don't be surprised!

Let it be the sign that says "you're going the right way!"

Stephen's opposition came from religious people

- ▶ First, they tried to reason with him (Acts 6:9-10)
- ▶ Finally, they just made stuff up (Acts 6:12-14)

And here's what I want us to see about Stephen: opposition revealed who he really was

We saw last week that he was selected as a leader because he was full of faith and wisdom (Acts 6:3) and this opposition revealed that he wasn't faking it.

He was a man full of grace and power (v. 8), full of wisdom (v. 10), and still radiated Jesus after the false attacks (v. 15)

How do we look when we're falsely accused or attacked because we're taking a stand for Jesus?

Knowing opposition will come can help us prepare now so that our character is ready then.

And it will come, because when we take a stand for Jesus, others will oppose us.

2. God's story becomes more important than our safety. (Acts 7:1-53)

We're not going to take the time to read all of chapter 7, but I want to point out one major part, and it happens in the very first verse.

The high priest asked Stephen if the false charges against him were true, and what follows is a history lesson of God's redemptive story from Abraham to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Sort of like Sunday School Cliff notes.

Now, how would you have answered that question? I'm not sure I would have answered it with God's story, I can tell you that.

The temptation - and quite naturally, I should add - would be to defend ourselves, our reputation, our integrity

But when the opposition gave Stephen a platform, he used it to promote God's story of redemption.

When we take a stand for Jesus, God's story becomes more important than our safety.

In case you haven't realized this by now, you and I weren't called to a safe life.

Following Jesus isn't about being safe, but about being spent.

My life for His glory.

Paul understood this when he wrote in Philippians 2:17 that he would rejoice even if he was poured out like a drink offering. In other words, spent totally for God on others.

God often puts us in impossible situations so that He can do impossible things through us.

John 12:24 says that God's plan for each of us who follow Him is death in order that many more can live.

That's what Stephen found. He could have played it safe and defended himself.

Instead he revealed the story of God's redemptive plan through Jesus.

It cost him his life (Acts 7:57-58), but it changed the church forever because a young man named Saul - who would later become Paul and write much of the NT - was there.

Great things happen when God's story becomes more important than our safety.

3. Jesus stands for us. (Acts 7:54-60)

If we ended it right there, it's not a great sell, is it?

I mean, we'd feel good for a few minutes about our lives counting for something more than collecting stuff, but at some point we'd realize that we might have to suffer, and then it stops being a great idea, doesn't it?

That's why this last thing is so great: when we stand for Jesus, Jesus stands for us.

That's the Big Idea that I want you to take away today.

Look what happened in Acts 7:55 when Stephen was surrounded by an angry mob who were opposing his faith and the story he was telling: he saw Jesus...STANDING!

Let's break that down:

▶ **He saw Jesus.**

- Lots of times, we don't. We're so focused on the people and the problem that we don't even see him.
- It's all about where you're looking.
- Did you know that once I almost embraced a woman from behind because I thought she was Wendy.
- She looked like her - a little - but I just wasn't paying attention.
- Hebrews 12:2 says fix your eyes on Jesus - be so close to him that he fills your vision

▶ **He saw Jesus standing.**

- If you read the Bible at all, you'll eventually see a phrase that goes something like "Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father"
- Not trying to teach what that means today, but the point here is that Jesus is usually known to be sitting, and yet here Stephen said that he saw the "Son of Man *standing* at the right hand of God."
- The obvious question is: why? What would make Jesus stand at that point in Stephen's life?
- I think he was giving Stephen a standing ovation, and I want him to give you one, too.

The Landing

I believe that this section in the book of Acts calls each one of us to a life that is risky and daring, and yet is ultimately applauded by Jesus.

Let's do something so great that it would cause Jesus to give each one of us a standing ovation.

Now, right away we're all starting to think of something big we can do, and yet I want to remind you of something that we've already seen in our journey through Acts: all the big things grew from small things.

Before Stephen died as the church's first martyr, he was one of the church's first servants.

He waited on tables - cleaned up messes - prayed for the sick.

He walked with Jesus daily, regularly.

His understood the power that comes from living authentically for Jesus on The Other Six days, and that laid the foundation that kept him strong when others opposed him for telling God's story.

Ultimately, that is what Jesus stood for, and he'll do the same for you and for me.

This week, when you stand for Jesus - in the big and small things - Jesus will stand for you.

And when he does, it will change everything, even the hearts of those who opposed you.

Let's pray.