

Unstoppable
Spirit-Filled Passion
Dr. David Platt
April 2, 2006



SPIRIT-FILLED PASSION

Acts 7:54-8:4

God, we pray that you would show us today from your Word what it means to truly be a God-follower. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I see a story about five guys who sacrificed everything and the result is an entire tribe of savages that is transformed and comes to Christ. And I think about my friend in India. Zameer, when he was a teenager, began to explore Christianity. He had grown up in a Muslim home, and he had started asking some questions. So one day his father and his brothers brought him into a room, closed the door and began to beat and abuse Zameer. They threw him up against a wall, hit him repeatedly and then after he had been beaten to a pulp they dragged him out of their house outside the gates, closed the gates and said, "Zameer, we don't want you to ever come back."

Zameer tells the story with tears in his eyes of how he banged on the gates outside of his house all night long asking them to let him back in. How that night he found refuge in a church and how in the days that followed he did give his life to Christ. How he has tried over and over and over again to try to reestablish contact with his family, but they have basically given him an ultimatum—something that he has to sign that would say that there is no way that he would ever try to even approach them. Even if one of them died, he is not allowed to go to their funeral.

And this man, Zameer, now lives in a city of 7 million people—most of whom have little or no knowledge of the gospel—and his biggest passion is to turn the largest Muslim mosque in that area into the largest church in that area.

I think of my friend, an older man in the Sudan, who spent part of his life in what is the equivalent of a concentration camp, seeing his friends and family die. A man who has also seen Christianity quadruple during the last twenty years as a result of the faith of him and others like him.

I think of Peter, a friend of mine in Asia, who I just got an email from a couple of weeks ago. Peter and his wife have received new threats of imprisonment because their ministry is growing it's becoming a little more public, that underground ministry. And as a result, the possibility of him being imprisoned has greatly increased. They have an eight-month-old newborn son—their first—but it's not stopping Peter. Peter and his wife, two weeks ago, went into a village and led seventy more people to faith in Christ knowing that the risk of imprisonment is greater now than it was the day before.

And I hear those stories, and I see what we just saw, and the question that penetrates my heart is, "Is it possible for us to have that kind of faith here? Is it possible for us to see the kind of things that we saw in that story... see the kind of things that we hear about all overseas? Is it possible to see that here?" Some of you have asked me that. Some of you

have come up to me and talked to me and said, "David, can we really have that kind of faith here?"

And what I want to say to you is that I believe we can. I believe with all my heart that we can, and I believe with all my heart that we can see God do amazing things—things that defy description. But I believe it's going to be costly in order for that to happen.

One Truth ...

God desires for the church to have a Spirit-filled passion that moves our city and all nations for Christ.

So if you have your Bibles with you, I want to invite you to open to Acts 7. And I want you to see one truth that's going to under gird everything that we talk about today. One truth, God desires for The Church at Brook Hills to have a Spirit-filled passion that moves Birmingham and all nations for Christ. I believe God desires for us to have this kind of faith. I believe He desires for us to have this kind of passion.

But I believe there are some things we need to think about if we really want this kind of faith—if we really want this kind of passion. I want us to look at four questions that I believe the church needs to answer today—particularly here in America—if we want to have the kind of faith that we've just seen displayed. Four questions that I think we need to answer, and they are based on Acts 7. Look with me in Acts 7:54. The Bible says:

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

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. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison (Acts 7:54-8:3).

If I can be honest with you, this text is a text I have studied many, many times before, but for some reason during this last week I have wrestled with this text in a whole new way. And I pray that God, by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, would give us the ability to look at this text with a new glimpse.

Four Questions ...

Will we choose mission over maintenance in the church?

Question number one that I think we need to ask ourselves as a church is, "Will we choose mission over maintenance in the church?" This question springs from the context of this whole passage. You remember we looked at this about a month ago. Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples, "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses*"—where? In Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth."

So that was the plan, and we saw that. The Holy Spirit has outlined a plan to take the gospel from Jerusalem as the home base to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. That was the design of God's church, but actually when you look all the way up to this point in Acts chapters 6 and 7, the gospel is pretty much stuck in Jerusalem at this point. They had gotten pretty comfortable here. Now not that things were easy—they were facing some persecution. But in many ways they had not yet begun to even fulfill that which was laid out in Acts 1:8.

In many ways this looked like a pretty traditional Jewish group. They had a lot of Jewish customs—a lot of traditions that they were holding onto pretty tightly. Even temple worship was still pretty important for the church. Even though Jesus had died on the cross and made access for us to be with God apart from a temple, they were still holding onto those Jewish customs and Jewish traditions.

Stephen has a Greek background. He comes on the stage and he says, "Guys, things need to change. We're not here just to maintain religious tradition and keep doing things the way we've been used to doing them. We've got a Savior and a mission that requires everything from us." Stephen starts to say some things that get a few people riled up.

I know what you're thinking—"Dave, thanks for the history lesson. What does that have to do with us today?" I want you to think about it with me. Is it possible that we in this room, and we in churches, face the same temptation that the earliest church faced in its germination—to get so caught up in religious tradition and in doing certain things, busying ourselves, that somewhere along the way there is a great temptation for you and I likewise to completely lose sight of our Savior and the mission that He has entrusted to us.

Let's be honest. We are a people that are good at being busy, and we can busy ourselves with activities in the church, and we can busy ourselves with maintaining the status quo. But what I want to say to you is this, the church is not about settling for a routine, monotonous motion of religious activity. That is not the purpose for which we have gathered here. We are not here just to go through a perfunctory motion where we sing some songs, watch some people on the stage, go home, and everything kind of stays the same. That is not what this whole deal is about. The church is not about settling for a routine monotonous motion of religious activity.

If you ever have the chance, read a book called *In the Shadow of the Almighty*. It's the biography of Jim Elliott, one of the missionaries that I have mentioned. I think one of the interesting things as I read that biography was seeing how he had become so discontent with exactly this in the church. He had become so discontent with people just kind of getting in a routine of monotonous religious activity and missing out on passion for Christ and passion for the mission of which we are a part. Listen to a couple of quotes from his journals:

People would ask him, "Why don't you stay in the United States and encourage the body here? Why do you have to go to Ecuador?" He said, "So what if the well-fed church in the homeland needs stirring?" He said, "They have the Scriptures, Moses and the Prophets, and a whole lot more." He said, "Their condemnation is written on their bankbooks and in the dust on their Bible covers. American believers have sold their lives to the service of money and God has His rightful way of dealing with those who succumb to the spirit of Laodicea."

That's a pretty heavy quote!

They would ask him, "You work with all the young people over there—these Indians—why don't you stay back and help the young people here in the United States?" He said, "You wonder why people choose fields away from the States when young people at home are drifting because no one wants to take time to listen to their problems." He said, "I'll tell you why I left—because those stateside young people have every opportunity to study, hear and understand the Word of God in their own language. And these Indians have no opportunity whatsoever. I've had to make a cross with two logs and lie down on it just to show the Indians what it means to crucify a man. When there is that much ignorance over here and so much knowledge and opportunity over there, I have no question in my mind why God sent me here." He wrote, "Those whimpering stateside young people will wake up on the Day of Judgment condemned to worse fate than these demon-fearing Indians, because, having a Bible, they were bored with it while these never even heard of such a thing as writing."

We have not gathered here to celebrate a routine, monotonous tradition. We are here because we are on a mission from Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The church is not about settling for a routine monotonous function of religious activity. Instead the church is about sacrificing every facet of our lives to make the glory of Christ known in all nations. That is the heart of what the church is about. Sacrificing every facet of our lives—every facet of the church—for one purpose: To make the glory of Christ known in Birmingham and in all nations.

Now it's at this point that I know some of you are wondering, "Well, how do you do that?" I've had some of you ask me—even email me—and say, "Okay, I'm in. I want to be a part of making disciples of all nations. I want to be a part of telling unreached people about the gospel. How do I do that?" I want to take a side note just for a couple of minutes and I want to give you five questions—practical questions—that I think can help you as you start to wrestle with how you can really sacrifice every facet of your life to make God's glory know in all nations.

I want to challenge you. Take a map of Birmingham; take a map of the world, whether this is you on your own or you with your family. Sit down and ask five questions. Number one, I want to challenge you to ask how will I pray? How will I pray? How can I pray to impact nations for the glory of Christ?

The good news is that today, from our knees, we can be a part of what God is doing in Cambodia, in Laos, in Thailand, in South Africa. We can be a part of what God is doing all over the world through our prayers. We can be a part of what God is doing in people's lives throughout Birmingham through our prayers. I want to ask you, though, in your prayer lives, "Is there really a global emphasis there?" Are you praying like you want to impact nations for the glory of Christ?

One tool that I use is a book called, *Operation World*. It's an incredible book. You can go through the whole year. You pray through a guide every day, and at the end of one year you will have prayed for every country in the world. It has prayer requests for every country in the world, status of Christianity in every country in the world, status of unreached people in every country in the world. *Operation World*. It's a great tool. But I want to ask you, "How are you praying to impact nations for the glory of Christ?"

Second, how will I study? By that I mean first of all God's Word. The more we know God's Word, the more we are filled with God's Spirit and the more equipped we are to go and to share the gospel and to make the gospel known—whether it's in our workplace, our communities, our homes, or on the other side of the world. So we need to be sharp when it comes to God's Word. We talked about that a couple of weeks ago.

Not only studying God's Word, but how can you sharpen your minds to be most effective when it comes to your job—whether you're in banking or teaching, whether you stay at home or you have the opportunity to work in engineering or whatever it is. How can you be so sharp in that area so that people will look at you and see the glory of God in you in the workplace? How can you study? How can we fill our minds to be more effective at sharing the gospel with other people here and around the world?

One of my personal goals at this point is to constantly be in the process of learning another language. Right now I'm working on learning some Chinese. My Spanish was not really good, which you heard a few months ago, but my Chinese is even worse. I don't know if you know Chinese, but it's a pretty difficult language. They have not only different words, but they have different tones for each word. So one word, for example *ma*, there are four different tones. You can either say it with a rising tone or a falling tone. You can do a kind of rising and falling. And then one other tone—I can't remember what it is. But they all mean different things. One of the ways you say the word *ma* means horse and the other way you say it means mother-in-law. You don't want to get those confused, okay?

I want to ask you, how are you studying to impact nations for the glory of Christ with your skills—with the gifts God has given you? How will I pray? How will I study?

Third, how will I give? How are you giving to impact nations for the glory of Christ? The fact is every single one of us—no exception—is extremely wealthy compared to the rest of the world. We have a tendency in the church to say, "Well, they are wealthy." Or "That person's wealthy." We are all extremely wealthy. Three billion people in the world today live on less than \$2 a day. And we will be held accountable for the way we use our resources to impact nations for the glory of Christ.

Let me say at this point, I praise the Lord for you. Last week you gave money to send almost 7,000 Bibles to people around the world. I praise God for that. I pray that God will continue to give you grace to be generous with the way you give.

Fourth question, how will I go? How am I going to be involved in going in this mission? Whether here in Birmingham, being involved in sharing the gospel with people in our everyday lives, or overseas. How are we going to be involved in doing both? It's not an either/or. People say, "Well, I like to do stuff here. I don't have to go over there." Well, it's a both/and. We want to be a part of making disciples in all nations. How will I go?

And question number five, how will I mobilize? What we are talking about when it comes to making disciples: It's more than just praying, it's more than just giving, it's more than just

going and studying. It's mobilizing others to do the same. It's mobilizing others to pray. Multiplication of our lives in the lives of those around us.

Just five practical questions. I would encourage you; you sit down in your life this week... Sit down with your family this week and say, "How are we going to pray, how are we going to study, how are we going to give, how are we going to go, and how are we going to mobilize to be a part of this mission?"

I'm convinced that if we would start asking those questions, it would completely change the climate in the church. It would completely change our conversations. All the things that we get bothered about or flustered by in the church—the things that we want to complain about—take on a whole new light when you're saying, "How can we most effectively make disciples of all nations?"

You don't complain about the song that was sung, and you don't complain about the way somebody was dressed when you realize there's over a billion people in the world who haven't heard the name of Jesus. I'm convinced that many of the internal arguments and the things that upset us most in the church come about because we are not involved in this mission. We get so caught up in a monotonous motion of religious activity, and that's not what we were intended to do. We are about sacrificing every facet of our lives to make the gospel of Christ known in all nations. Will you choose mission over maintenance in the church?

Is our worship driven by a God-centered passion or a man-centered production?

Question number two: Is our worship driven by a God-centered passion or a man-centered production? This really comes alive in Stephen's speech from the beginning of Acts 7, all the way to the point where we just read. I think it's one of the most difficult speeches—if not the most difficult speech—in the book of Acts to really dissect.

But I think at the core, the speech that Stephen gives—he's brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the day—and basically his speech is about worship. He talks about how the people there in Jerusalem had gotten a completely misconstrued idea of worship. They had begun to think that worship happens at our place on our terms for our glory. I want you to see that take place.

Look with me back in Acts 6:12. I want you to see the accusation they brought against Stephen. You'll see those first two parts come out: worshipping in our place and on our terms. Listen to how they limited worship to a place and to their own traditions. Look at Acts 6:12, "*So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.*" Now look at verse 13, "*They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law'*" (Acts 6:13). There it is, the place and the terms. "*For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us*" (Acts 6:14).

They were holding on so tightly to the fact that, "We worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and we do things the way we have always done them according to our traditions and the customs Moses passed on to us. That's the way we do worship at our place on our terms."

And then, they said, "We do it for our glory." Now they might not have said this outright, but I want you to look at the end of Stephen's speech. Look at chapter 7:48. Look at this with me, how he closes out what really shuts the door on Stephen speaking to these folks. He says in verse 48,

However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?" says the Lord. "Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?" You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it (Acts 7:48-53).

He said, "You put Christ to death—God in the flesh—and yet you cling so tightly to these houses that you have made, a temple that you have made with your own hands. That's worshipping not for the glory of God in Christ, but for your own glory." There's an example of it back in verse 41. Look at this—it really comes alive. See how the people were worshipping for their glory. It says, "*That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf*" (Acts 7:41). He's using this as an example, but look at this, "*They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made*" (Acts 7:41).

Don't miss the picture: They had created idols, put them up, bowed down and worshipped them. They had created gods to be who they wanted them to be and began to worship them. And they celebrated what their hands had made. Worship happens at our place, on our terms, for our glory.

Now I want you to think about how the same dangerous temptation is there for you and me today. We live in a church culture where over the last ten or fifteen years there has been a revival of worship, and all kinds of new worship music, some contemporary, some a little more traditional, all kinds of new ways to worship. We have bands and people who lead us in what is very exciting celebrative worship, and that is a good thing. But I want you to think about how it can easily become a dangerous temptation for us to limit worship to a certain place. Do you think we are guilty of that?

So programmed to come in here and sing our songs and do the drill that we forget that worship is what happens when we walk out of these doors and into our workplaces. Do we limit worship to a certain place when we spend literally millions upon millions upon millions of dollars in the United States building houses for us to worship in? What about our terms? Our traditions? I'm convinced that one of the most divisive areas in the church of Christ today in America is worship style, what songs you prefer, or what songs I prefer. I'm not saying there are not important questions in there, but I am saying it's very, very possible for us to get so caught up in our discussions about traditions and styles that we lose sight of what it means to have a passion for the Christ that we worship.

But here's where it really hits home, and this hit me like a ton of bricks as I was studying this week. Worship happens at our place on our terms. Listen to this, for our glory. This picture of a people who were making idols and bowing down and worshipping them. Think about this, do you think it's possible that we are tempted to create God to be who we want Him to be—a god who is not demanding whole-hearted devotion from every single one of us? A god who is okay with the fact that we watch more TV or spend more time on the Internet than we ever think about His Word? A god who is okay with that? A god who would not call us to do anything uncomfortable or call us to make really huge sacrifices? A god who is comfortable with our materialism, comfortable with our infatuation with things? We create a god—maybe a god who is a lot like us.

Think about it with me, we create god to be a lot like us. We come in here, and we sing our praises, and we lift our hands to him—this god that we have created that is a lot like us. If that's the case, then when we come in here and sing and lift our hands we are not worshipping God. We are worshipping ourselves.

I want you to see a contrast in this passage of Scripture. That's the picture we got in this whole speech from Stephen, but then you get to the part we just read and it says, "*Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*" (Acts 7:55). This is where true worship begins. True worship sees the glory of God in Christ, glimpses His glory; sees the glory of God in Christ. Stephen is captivated by it. He sees Jesus standing, and you know that everywhere else in Scripture when we see Jesus at the right hand of God He is sitting down. Why is He standing now? All kinds of scholars have debated why Jesus would be standing in this situation. I think it's twofold.

Number one, I do believe He is standing on behalf of Stephen, as an advocate for Stephen, as an encouragement to Stephen in this deep time of need. What an incredible encouragement to look up and see Jesus standing on your behalf. But I think it is two-fold. Not only is He standing on behalf of Stephen, but I believe He is standing as judge on the people who have engrossed themselves in worship and completely missed out on the person of Christ.

Jesus is standing there. Stephen sees that. But then don't miss the importance of what happens next. This is a scene that Stephen saw, that if he was pretty smart he probably would have kept to himself, don't you think? These guys are ready to take his life. It almost seems like Stephen is egging them on a little bit here. He could have been content with seeing the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, but what does he have to do? Stephen says, "Look, guys, I see heaven open and the Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God." That was it for Stephen. At this they rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

But I want you to see that true worship does not stop with seeing the glory of God in Christ. True worship continues to proclaim the goodness of God in Christ. They go together. You see, Stephen's heart was so enthralled with the glory of Christ that he couldn't help but to speak about it. I want you to look at something really interesting, too. When he says in verse 56, "Look, I see heaven open," and it doesn't say in your bible "and I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God" even though that's what verse 55 has just said. It doesn't say, "I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God." What does it say? "I see the Son of Man."

Now think about this with me. You could miss this, and this is a huge part of this passage. You remember Son of Man is the title that Jesus would use to refer to Himself throughout the Gospels, but nobody else ever called Jesus the Son of Man. Only He called Himself the Son of Man.

So when Stephen is about to die he says, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Why did he use that term? We saw this when we were looking at the Great Commission and the authority of Christ. This is exactly what Stephen is alluding to. Daniel 7:13-14, "*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*"

That's what Stephen saw. He saw the one who is sovereign over all nations and all peoples and all tribes and all languages, and he said, "Look, I see that Jesus is not only the guy you crucified, the guy you assassinated, He is the one who is sovereign over everything." He couldn't help but to proclaim what Christ had done.

It was the overflow of his heart. He knew that worship could not start with seeing the glory of God in Christ. He had to proclaim it. It's the same thing—John Bunyan. Many of you are familiar with *Pilgrim's Progress*. Did you know that John Bunyan spent twelve years in prison? At any point John Bunyan could have gotten out if he had only promised not to proclaim Christ. Twelve years. His wife and his children needed him. One of his daughters was blind, and yet he stayed in prison for twelve years. Some of the times they would come and visit him and he said it was like "pulling the flesh from my bones. I wanted to be with my family." But proclaiming Christ was more important to him.

Some of you are thinking, "Okay, if worship means that I proclaim Christ, I tell others about Christ, I need to get training in that. I don't know how to do that." I do think training in sharing the gospel is important, and that's one of the things that we've been talking about is how to put that before us so that we can be more effective at sharing the gospel. But I want to remind you that training is not necessary in order to share the gospel with the people around you.

How many of you are parents or grandparents? Anybody? Okay, we've got a lot. Of those of you who raised your hand, how many of you received training on how to talk about your children or grandchildren? How many of you have been through the course, Grandparents Talking and Bragging About Grandchildren? How many of you have been through the course? Because I know you do it. I hear you do it. We don't have to go through training. Why not? Because they are on our heart, and they are always on our mind. And what comes out of your heart— what's on your heart—always comes out of your mouth.

What happens when the church of God savors the glory of God in Christ, and as a result they can't help but to shout the glory of God in Christ? Is our worship about a God-centered passion or a man-centered production?

Will we embrace suffering as the primary means for the spread of the gospel on Earth?

Question number three, will we embrace suffering as the primary means for the spread of the gospel on Earth? I want you to see how Luke develops this, because that's a pretty bold question. The primary means for the spread of the gospel through our suffering, will we embrace that? God ordains for our lives to mirror the sufferings of Christ. We see that all through the gospel. What does Jesus say? "If anyone is going to come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." We imitate Christ.

But I want you to see that when you come to Stephen's death, it's very interesting... If we had time we'd go back and forth between Luke and Acts, but I just want you to think about the similarities. It says, "They all rushed at him (verse 58), dragged him out of the city." That's exactly what Hebrews 13:13 says Jesus was dragged out of the city...taken outside the camp to be crucified there. It says, "*While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'*" (Acts 7:59). Does that sound familiar? "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit?"

What does he say after that? "*Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'*" (Acts 7:60). (Jesus said) "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do." Luke is intentional to show us, you can go back and compare it in Luke 23 and 24;

there are so many parallels between the death of Stephen and the death of Christ. Because Luke is showing us—the Holy Spirit is showing us—that our lives are intended to mirror the sufferings of Christ.

“Okay, we’ll buy into that, Dave, but the primary means for us to share the gospel on Earth is going to be through our suffering?” Now, I want you to think about it with me. God’s strategy for redeeming the world to Himself—what is it? It was a suffering servant. Ask the question, “How do you think God has shown His love most clearly to the world?” He has done it through a suffering servant, through the sacrifice of His only Son. That is how He chose His strategy for showing His love and His grace to the world.

What I want to say to you is that I do not believe God’s strategy has changed. God’s strategy has not changed. He is showing His love and His grace and His mercy to the world through suffering servants. I want to show you two passages of Scripture that help supplement this.

Go to Philippians 1. I want you to see two verses from Paul that illustrate this. God’s strategy in the world today is for showing His love and His grace and His mercy in the world today through suffering servants. Look at Philippians 1:27. We’re going to focus on verse 29, but I want you to get the context. He says, “*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God*” (Phil. 1:27-28). Now listen to verse 29, “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have*” (Phil. 1:29).

Did you hear that? Paul said it’s been granted to you. It’s a gift not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer. Now that’s weird. “Come receive Christ and get a gift. Free gift—suffering!” That doesn’t pull a lot of people into church.

Look over at the next book, Colossians 1:24 and look at what the Bible says there. Paul says,

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:24-27).

Did you catch what verse 24 said? He said, “I fill up”—we fill up what is lacking in regards to Christ’s afflictions.

Now what is Paul saying there? Is he saying that what Christ did on the cross was not enough, that we need to finish that work? No, he’s talking about the mission of Christ. When he says Christ is in you, the hope of glory, he is saying that if we are going to display the love and the grace and the mercy of Christ in the world today, it will not primarily be through your prosperity but through your suffering and through the afflictions that you share with Christ.

Think about it. How are we going to show Christ to the world if everything always goes right for us? If everything is always good for us, how are we going to show the afflictions of a suffering servant? The world is not impressed with people who have everything and just turn into gratitude on Sunday. But when life hands us trials and difficulties and sufferings, and in the middle of them we say, "Christ is my hope of glory!" That speaks volumes to our world.

Now I'm not saying in any way that this is an easy thing. We've heard a story about Ella Grace and the horrible time this family has been going through. I cannot imagine the pain and the trial that they are going through. And it's represented here, the things that you may have gone through. But if, when things that are difficult happen to us, we shake our fist at God and we indict God then we miss the whole point of our sufferings. Our sufferings are intended to show the grace and the glory of Christ. God allows us to experience them. Ever since the day of Job till now, He allows us to experience them so that this mission can be accomplished. That's exactly what Stephen is experiencing here, and we've got to get a hold onto this. God, help us get a hold onto this!

Many times when I talk about going overseas, people automatically begin to think, "Well, isn't it dangerous to go overseas?" I have a friend of mine who works with an independent mission-sending organization, and after September 11th he told me the number of people willing to go overseas drastically dropped. Parents not wanting their student/children to go. Parents not wanting to go themselves. "It's too much risk." Grandparents, senior adults. "We're not going to go. It's too much risk. It's too difficult."

And I hear that, and I couldn't help but think, "You know, on September 12th, God did not come down to the church in America and say, "Okay, let's put a stop on it. Let's put a hold on it. We're going to make my glory known in all nations about ten years from now when it's safe for Americans to fly and the war on terror is over and you are more liked around the world. Then we'll go back to making the salvation of Christ known in all nations." That is not what He said.

These words were written by a guy who said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." Isn't it dangerous? Yes! What happens when a church embraces that? Now I know that at this point you are thinking, "You've gone off the edge, Dave. That is far too radical." I believe it's biblical.

Please hear me, I am not in any way saying that we need to pursue persecution or seek out suffering. That's not at all what I am saying. But I remember a conversation I had with one girl in Asia. She had an American name. She called herself Jemima. Isn't that a great name? I don't know who told her to name herself Jemima, after pancake syrup, but it's Jemima. Jemima is sitting there, and she says, "David, my family and my friends have experienced much persecution in my country, but we've done it for a reason. That's why I'm going to India with my life because I want to make the gospel known." She looked around at others who were at this training, and she said, "Many of us may die, but we are willing to be tortured, and even to die if we can complete the mission of Christ." There was nobody there asking, "Isn't it dangerous for us to do this?"

Meanwhile, a world away, we sit here and we say, "The safest place to be is at the center of God's will." Let me tell you what words did not come out of Stephen's mouth when stones were being hurled at him. "The safest place to be is at the center of God's will." The center of God's will may just be the most dangerous place to be. Will we embrace suffering as the primary means for the spread of the gospel on Earth?

I've got to share this with you. This is a letter from Adoniram Judson, first missionary from America. He was wanting to marry Anne, and he asked her father for permission, and wrote him a letter. Imagine Dad is in this room. You have a daughter. This is the letter you get from the proposed husband. The letter said,

I have now to ask whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world? Whether you can consent to her departure and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life? Whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress, to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death? Can you consent to all this, for the sake of Him who left His heavenly home and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls, for the sake of the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with a crown of righteousness brightened by the acclamations of praise which shall resound to her Savior from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?

How would you respond to that? The father let her decide. Anne said, "Yes." Will we embrace suffering as the primary means to spread the gospel on Earth?

Is this mission unstoppable enough to die for?

Question number five, is this mission unstoppable enough to die for? I just want you to see this, Stephen dies a horrible death. Luke tells us he fell asleep. It's an interesting way to describe somebody who has just been stoned to death. Death is always peaceful for the believer who is on the mission with Christ, no matter how violent it may look to the rest of the world.

And look at what happens next. "*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church*" (Acts 8:1). And where did they go? Now remember when we started this whole thing, Acts 1:8, they are stuck in Jerusalem. They are not going to Judea, Samaria or to the ends of the earth. Where did they go? It says they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

The Great Commission was being accomplished not in spite of the sufferings of Stephen and the church, but precisely by the means of suffering in Stephen's life and the church. Don't miss this, Satan's strategy to stop the church actually serves to advance the church. In the days to follow they go throughout. Acts 11:19, says—the believers were gathered together in Antioch, that was the sending base to go to all nations—those believers were there because they had been scattered with the persecution associated with Stephen. Acts 11:19. The gospel was being advanced as they experienced that suffering. That's how the gospel advanced.

What I want to tell you is that nothing, absolutely nothing, will stop this mission. Death will not stop it. Suffering, persecution, intense times of trial, they will not stop this mission. They will only serve to advance this mission in the hearts of God's people. So the question I ask you is, "Is this mission unstoppable enough to die for?"

I want to share with you a quote. Before you start thinking, "Well, how does God want me to die for this mission?" Let me share with you a quote from Elizabeth Elliott, wife of Jim Elliott, who was a missionary in the Ecuadorian jungle. She says,

Jim's aim was to know God. His course: obedience—the only course that could lead to fulfillment of his aim. His end was what some would call an extraordinary death, although in facing death he had quietly pointed out that many have died because of obedience to God. He and the other men with whom he died were hailed as heroes and martyrs. I do not approve, nor would they have approved. Is the distinction between living for Christ and dying for Him, after all, so great? Is not the second the logical conclusion of the first? Furthermore, to live for God is to die daily, as the apostle Paul put it. It is to lose everything that we may gain Christ. It is in thus laying down our lives that we can find Him.

Four Challenges ...

So in that spirit I give you four challenges.

First, get involved personally and practically in this mission. Sit down with your family this week; sit down by yourself with a map of the world and say, "How are we going to impact nations and Birmingham for the glory of Christ?"

Number two, repent of self-centered worship that never leads to God-centered proclamation. Repent of worship that is done in our place, on our terms, for our glory.

Number three, embrace suffering as a means for accomplishing the Great Commission in your life. God help me, I do not say that lightly. I know that many of you are experiencing some very difficult times, but I want to encourage you to embrace suffering as a means to show the hope and the glory of Christ in your lives during this time.

Finally, number four, die daily to yourself and to this world in order that you might gain Christ and make Him known.

Will you bow your heads with me? With your heads bowed and your eyes closed, I know that we have been diving into some pretty heavy stuff today. I just want to give you a couple of minutes in prayer to reflect on how this applies to your life. While we have some time of reflection, spend some time in prayer. These four challenges that I've given you, these questions that we have looked at, how are they going to take place in your life?

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt & Radical. Website: Radical.net