

Your Face in 2019

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'm going to look at one or two different verses tonight from different parts of the Bible, but specifically it's based on the reading that we did that Sam read from Acts chapter 6 about Stephen who became the first martyr and were told about the crowd who looked on him at the end of the chapter, chapter 6 and verse 15, and gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

So the title for this sermon is Your Face in 2019, okay, because faces are great things, they're amazing things really, aren't they? Well, when we come at church, I've definitely got the better end of the deal, okay, because all you've got to look at right through church is my ugly coupon for the whole service, but I've got the advantage of looking at all of your lovely faces throughout church, and faces are great things.

Just think about your face for a minute, or think about faces in general, because really they're windows into our souls in some ways. But tonight I'm going to be speaking about our face, literally, but also I think symbolically and metaphorically, as it reveals more about ourselves, because our faces are really a window into our character very often, and you should think about that more.

You should think about your face more, because that's what people see. And often your face will reveal interest, or may it never be boredom, guilt, joy, sadness, happiness.

So our faces are really, really important part of our lives, and I think I can tell quite a lot about somebody by their face.

[2 : 14] I think we all can. Our faces do to a greater or lesser degree express our personality, and I do think you should think about that. I think you should think about the face you put on in the morning.

I don't mean the makeup. I mean the face that you put on in the world, and by that I also don't mean a hypocritical face, but I mean the face that reveals who we are and what we believe inside.

I think we can spend quite a lot of time actually hiding our true feeling or our true being with our facial expressions or lack of them in our lives, and I don't think that's necessarily a good thing.

I think sometimes in our stoic, presbyterian world, particularly in worship, our faces are not expressive enough and can appear to the outsider as faces of those who are having a time of great misery and unhappiness, which isn't the case, I hope, and I'm sure it isn't.

But often in redemption, when we come to Christ, coming to faith in Christ, particularly somebody who's come out with a covenantal background, out with a family who are Christians, someone who comes to Christ, you see it in their face, you notice it, and that should be the case, and that is often the case.

[3 : 49] There's an outward expression of an inner faith revealed sometimes in our faces. Now, Stephen here, very physically, Stephen here is said to have had the face of an angel when he sat in the council, those who sat in the council saw his face, his face was like the face of an angel.

He was at the point of, he was in deep trouble. He was about to be martyred for his faith, in fact, although he may not know that at that point, he still was persecuted and opposed and challenged for his newfound faith in Christ.

The face of an angel, there was a radiance about his face. Now, it doesn't mean he was baby-faced, that's not what he's speaking about. This is not a weak picture. This is not a soft, sentimental, gentle picture.

This is a strong image. This is Stephen in the midst of intense suffering, opposition and threatened martyrdom, and his face did not give that expression of fear and terror in that situation.

There was an inexplicable peace and dignity and Christ-likeness about him in that difficult situation. God was with him.

[5 : 08] There was a reflection of being close to Christ and close to central kingdom work, which we were looking at this morning.

Now, Matthew 18 verse 10, I've got a few verses coming up. When Jesus was speaking about believers and the opposition of his face, he said, See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven, the angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. Now, I'm not going to go into that verse, but it's speaking about facing God and it's speaking about understanding as little ones who belong to Jesus where our focus should be.

We should be facing the Father, our Father in heaven and communion with Him. Our faces, as Thomas mentioned this morning in repentance, we are turned toward God. You know, that's a spiritual thing.

But it's also a sense in which it's a physical thing. We turn towards God in prayer and we're in communion with Him. And we should have that attitude of protection towards all those who are God's children and a responsibility to them.

[6 : 22] So I just wondered, just as a kind of gentle entrance into 2019, will it be evident, as Thomas was talking about this morning, that we're different because we're Christians?

And that will be evident even in our faces. Is that a bit too shallow? Is that a bit too physical? Maybe so.

But I think there's at least a linking between physical truth and spiritual truth here that we're going to look at, that there should be in our lives something evident that people know and recognize, particularly by our reactions, maybe in trouble, in opposition, when things are difficult, when we suffer and when we're persecuted.

God has given us this picture of Stephen whose face was like the face of an angel. There's maybe particular reasons for that. But let's learn a little bit about what that means for us as we go into 2019.

Why was Stephen like this? Well, the interesting thing is this chapter unpacks one or two facts about Stephen, the kind of believer he was, and it's the kind of believer we can all be.

[7 : 39] He was someone who was spiritually full, okay? That word, full, is used three times in this passage of Stephen. He was spiritually full. He was full of the Holy Spirit, he was full of grace and power, full of wisdom.

He's used that, that phrase is used of Stephen, and it's like a great word. It's a word that really has the idea of maturity and of knowing, you know what you're like after you've had a big meal, you're full.

You've been satisfied, you've been provided for, and he was aware that spiritually God had provided for him, and he had a friend in Christ, and his spiritual needs had been met in Christ, and it was nothing hollow or empty about his faith.

There was nothing hypocritical. He was absolutely full, and it's used of Stephen here. It's Christ that gave him his resources, his satisfaction, that's where his appetites lay, and he was satisfied at the very core of his...

You know that Jesus speaks about that, he says that, if you come to me, you will live life, and you will live life to the full. Now, very often we have a very different meaning to living life to the full.

[8 : 56] Woo-hoo, party time, life to the full. And we think sometimes, sometimes people take that as what it means to follow Jesus, you get kind of life in the fast lane.

But its meaning is similar to here. It's finding our satisfaction and fullness in being reunited with our Father, and knowing that that's where our contentment and our fullness lies.

So we see that about Stephen, he was full. And it says these things, he was full. In verse 3 we're told of the Holy Spirit, he was one of the deacons that was chosen to be served and help the apostles, and each of them were to be the men who were full of the Spirit and wisdom.

So Stephen was someone who was full of the Spirit of God. Now, Mary read in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and spoke about the Old Testament, how in the Old Testament Moses, or the faces of the people in the Old Testament were veiled, they couldn't see, and they couldn't understand.

Only Moses was allowed in God's presence in that way, and when he came back from the presence of God his face physically in that Old Testament context shone, so that his face had to be veiled from others because they themselves couldn't see.

[10 : 21] And in Christ the veil is lifted on every believer. The spiritual darkness is lifted, the chains of unbelief have fallen off, and he has seen and knows the living Christ.

And he believes and knows the law of God that's written not on tablets of stone but on his heart, because the law of God leaves humanity guilty and in darkness, but as it's fulfilled in Christ and then as we follow Christ the law of God becomes the way of life that we live for Him out of gratitude filled with the Holy Spirit who enables to do that.

And that's what we are being asked to be full of in our lives. We sung about the Holy Spirit and the need for the Holy Spirit in our lives, and He sets us free to serve Him in all His fullness.

It breaks legalism and it breaks self-righteousness, and we are allowed to live fully in obedience again as we saw this morning in the power of the Holy Spirit bearing fruit as we are rooted in Jesus Christ.

So Stephen who was full of the Holy Spirit was obedient, was obedient to the law, and it's actually quite interesting because that was really what he was being accused of breaking by the religious leaders of the day.

[11 : 52] But rather than breaking God's law, he was fulfilling God's law, he was obedient, he was following in the power of the Holy Spirit, and I think that is one reason why his face shone like an angel.

I think it would have reminded the people, the Jewish council who were questioning him of Moses and of the law and of the Old Testament and of God's favour and of God's blessing.

But as we live our lives in obedience to Jesus Christ, we begin to reflect the glory of the Lord in our lives. And yes, I argue in our faces as well, in our interest, in our desire, in our ability to live with this foundation and with this joy in our lives, in our reaction, in our choices, in our attitudes, and even in our demeanour that we give off the impression that we are following someone who's worth it and our lives are worth it.

You know, it doesn't mean we're going to go around with a big smile on our face all the time and that we're, you know, that you're all going to grinning wildly towards me in church.

It's not that. It's kind of nothing we can manufacture. But do you know what I mean?

[13 : 24] Do you know what I mean when you can see it in people's faces? I think it's really important when people come into this church for the first time, it's all your faces they see.

I wonder if that gives away anything about your soul and about what matters to you and what's significant, does it? I wonder, I think it should.

And I do think sometimes that our faces particularly can reveal spiritual backsliding, can reveal coldness of heart, not all the time, but I think it can sometimes reveal when we're far from our Father, when we're disinterested in the things of God, when we're embittered or broken or deeply sad.

And there's a need for Christ to transform these experiences for us. He was full of the Holy Spirit and that was evident in His face.

But He was also full, we're told in verse 8, of God's grace and power. Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. And I think we get a little bit of a hint of why that's the case in Psalm 34, verse 5.

[14 : 46] We're going to sing this at the end of the Psalm. Those who look to Him are radiant and their faces shall never be ashamed. So there was, I think it's going back to the first point, that really Stephen was someone who kept looking to the Lord.

And as he was calling on the Lord and looking to the Lord, he was used greatly by the Lord as he cried out to the Lord. He was relying on God and God did great things through him. He used miraculous ways to see the expansion of God's kingdom.

Stephen was used in that great way, great wonders and signs among the people in these early days of the Christian church. Ultimately, God used him in a very different way through, he smattered them remarkably.

But nonetheless, he was used in these great ways. And the ideas of grace and power could be translated sweetness and strength.

Grace and power, sweetness and strength, the same kind of thing. It's this great paradoxical reality of what it is to be a Christian.

[15 : 49] There's a gentleness, there's a sweetness, but there's also a courage and a strength. And that is really important in our Christian lives. As I said before, this is not a picture of weakness.

And to have an angelic well, an angelic face, we've made it all kind of cherublike. But the angels are terrifying beings.

They're not kind of soft and gentle. They're really terrifyingly glorious beings. And that comes across in this characterization of Stephen, he was full of God's grace and power, sweetness and strength. And you know, you can see that, can't you, in the face of a mature believer, an older Christian. You can see, I think you can see it very often in their face. There might be a ruggedness about their face, particularly their blokes, which is full of experience and suffering maybe. But also there's a sweetness and a warmth and a brightness that reveals that through their struggles and battles, they've relied on Christ and they've come through it with Christ and looking to Christ.

[17:00] So you find that sometimes, you know, you could think of maybe your grandparents or maybe your parents in some case, or an older person in church, that you've looked to and there's a depth about their face.

There's a ruggedness there that you know they've gone through a lot of experiences. But when they smile or when they talk about Jesus, that ruggedness kind of dissolves into a sweetness. It's not a harsh face that they have. It's one that's been molded by His character and is full of grace and power. They've relied on Him. He has been with them and He has never let them down. So as you go through your life in 2019, I am doubtless sure that there will be great challenges. You might face many crises.

We might be challenged by our own weakness, or by temptation, by opposition, by suffering or doubt. But the answer is always the same.

[18:01] Those who look to Him, their faces will be radiant. We keep looking to Him. That's why we've made such a deal about last year reading the whole of the Bible.

This year, if you've read your bulletin, the free church is encouraging us all to read the New Testament from towards the end of January. That's why we're doing a New City cacism. Because all of that, as we learn more about Jesus, as we look to Him in life and in prayer, that's where the answer to prayer in the Word is what we call experimental religion. It's experiencing. It's putting into practice. It's living out that ourselves. So that we come to the place where we can say, like, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, no, my will but yours be done with a degree of ruggedness, but also a great deal of sweetness and reality, knowing His will, living His will, doing His will in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And there's no limitations on how God will use you in the year as we rely on Him, as we look to Him, our faces, our lives, our faces are radiant.

[19:16] We radiate with the presence and the knowledge of Jesus. So He was full of the Holy Spirit. He was full of God's grace and power. And verse 3 reminds us again that He was also full of wisdom, full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom.

He had insight, great insight and great knowledge, great dependence on the Lord in His day-to-day living. Ecclesiastes 8 verse 1 gives us a little hint towards that.

Who is like the wise and who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom, a person's wisdom makes his face shine and the hardness of his face has changed.

So there's a sense in which, there's maybe reality, physical reality, but there's also symbolism about our lives, our faces revealing our lives, or they are hardened by life's experience, or they soften by the wisdom of God's grace.

Sin in our lives, sin in our lives makes our faces and makes our hearts hard and dark.

[20:26] That's what sin does for us. We're turned away from the living God, we're turned away from His grace and from His love, and it makes our lives and our faces hard and dark.

The first step of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, coming to that place where we accept God through Jesus Christ, and where we understand that sin is actually our enemy.

It may be attractive, we may think it will make us happy, but ultimately it brings us to a place of hard-heartedness and darkness.

Grace changes us. That's why we say again and again and again. Theology is really important, and I'm reading about that just now because I'm doing a course about that in terms of counselling.

And theology is hugely important because it's the knowledge of God, it's knowing God. But I think one of the other sides of that is a false knowledge of God, or leaving theology as theology and not allowing it to change our face or change our life.

[21:49] Grace, the knowledge of God through grace and theology must change who we are. It must change our responses, our reactions, our lives.

You know, because I've had my, I think it's dangerous to say, I've had my fill of people who know a great deal and who are theologically at one level astute, but whose lives do not reflect Christ. That's possible, isn't it? And that's dangerous, really dangerous. It's really dangerous to know in our heads about Jesus, but not allow that knowledge to change us in our hearts, but rather use it self-righteously, maybe pointing towards others, making us proud rather than humble. Knowledge of God and the wisdom and the fear of Lord is always about being changed so that we worship, we turn towards Him, we bow the knee. And that will enable us to live with great love for God and great love for others.

That is the whole of God's law. And that is wisdom. It's that great gift of self-forgetfulness.

[23 : 12] So as we do that, putting God before me is a great challenge for us in 2019. God before me.

God before me. That's a huge challenge for us. It gives us, that's what His wisdom gives us and enables us to do and be, enables us to have that fear of the Lord, that great radiance that Ecclesiastes speaks about.

But we also see that that wisdom, it's a great wisdom, and I think this is again related to this morning, because it stands unopposed. Verse 10, when Stephen was being challenged by these different religious leaders and they disputed with him, it says in verse 10 that they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

So there's a double-barreled outworking of grace here. He had wisdom and he had the Holy Spirit in his life. And that gave him great moral authority, and it meant that those who opposed him could not stand.

Now that's a great thing for us as ordinary Christians. In other words, we're talking about sharing our faith and I'm really passionate that we think about taking away these word one for ones.

[24 : 36] We've got 20 of them. They were a sale of return. I don't want to give back any of them. I want them. 20 is not that much, it's about a tenth of congregation.

So even if one in ten of us will take one and think of using it and pray about using it, sharing our faith with someone else. The great thing is that our sharing of our faith is above argument and intelligence and even logic.

It's not illogical, but it's above logic in some ways. And the wisdom and the fear of the Lord is such that we are able to speak in such a way that those who oppose us cannot stand against it.

It does mean standing up for our faith. It does mean being courageous where we are, who we are in our lives with that obedient lifestyle that we mentioned already today.

As we face Jesus, we need Him daily and there's no easy, there's no real way around that. But as we do, we recognize that we are able to live and stand unopposed.

[25 : 51] And He had great courage to speak in this way. He was speaking up for the gospel in the toughest of situations. Daniel 12, 3, this is the last verse I think that I've got.

Those who are wise, this is to do with wisdom, the courage of wisdom, those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky above and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever.

The greatest mark of wisdom, isn't it? Those who are wise are those when we can turn other people to the Son of righteousness, to Jesus Himself.

That's the great mark of wisdom. It's not the mark of wisdom of this world and it is often not the mark of wisdom in the church, but it's a great mark of wisdom biblically that we lead many towards the Son of righteousness.

A lovely picture of light, of radiating believer, facing the light, bringing light to others and bringing others to the light. And that's a great challenge for us as we go into this year that we would have the courage to do this.

[26 : 56] It's not easy for us and we need to be dependent on Christ and we need to be wise. But it's the greatest responsibility, it's the greatest privilege, it's the greatest responsibility each of us have this year is to buy our lives and not even so much by what we say, although what we say will be very important.

But I think it's interesting here that it's the face of Stephen that was like an angel. It's kind of, it's both and, isn't it? As we are facing Christ, our lives will be such that it will be attractive and challenging to people and we will share our faith then in words.

And you know, if you're a Christian you'll know this, because I certainly have experienced this, that the greatest joy we have in our Christian lives is leading someone else to Jesus. That's when we really radiate. That is the happiest day of our lives. And that's when probably our faces are at their most beautiful, because it changes everything for us when we are able to see people we've prayed for, people we've shared with, people we love, people we've wept over, people we thought would never come to faith, coming to faith in Jesus Christ. It's the greatest joy and it's the greatest motivation. And that's an amazing thing. So in conclusion then, very, very briefly, we see that Stephen was someone who was full of life. [28 : 32] He was full of life. He was full of wisdom. He was full of grace and power. He was full of the Holy Spirit. And his face shone like the face of an angel.

He was full of life and he was just about at the end of his life. He had no earthly prospects. There was really nothing humanly speaking that would attract anyone else to him. And yet we're told that the people were gazing at him. All the council saw his face, like the face of an angel. It's interesting.

It's a really strong word that we have there. It's not a quick glance. It's not a passing look. They were gazing at him. The NIV says that they were looking intently at him.

It's not an awkward glance. It's an intense lingering examination.

[29 : 35] And who was the person in the next chapter that looked at him most intently? Chapter 7 at verse 58, as he was being martyred, then they cast him out of the city and stoned him, Stephen, and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

So a young man named Saul who was looking intently at him in that chapter. And undoubtedly Stephen's witness throughout this period became part of Saul's journey to faith in Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly Saul saw why you kick against the pricks. He was being prodded by Jesus to come to faith, and surely Stephen's witness and testimony martyred him was part of that.

People looked intently, people looked intently. In a sense that's what we're looking for this year, that there's something about our lives as Christians, something there's an attractiveness, there's something different, something in our faces, something in our reaction to suffering, something about our wisdom, our strength, our grace, our knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit that causes people to look at us and wonder about what it is that we have and who it is that we are.

It's a sobering question really about our lives. Is there anything that people would look at and see as being different? But it's a great encouragement too that all the resources that Stephen had, we have as we look to Christ.

[31 : 18] We look to Christ and face Him. We recognize and we know that our lives can be used by Jesus powerfully because do bear in mind as we head into another year, Revelation chapter 6 verse 15 and 17.

The kings of the earth, the great ones and the generals, the rich, the powerful and everyone, slaves and free, hid themselves in the caves and among rocks on the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, fallen as unhiders from the face of Him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

For the great day of the wrath that's coming, who can stand? There will be a day when we can't invite people to repent and turn and face Jesus. But people will actually, they will look to turn away from Jesus because it will be too late and they will ask for anything to hide them from the face of that most terrible of all pictures in the Bible, the wrath of the Lamb.

It's a strange paradoxical statement, the most unwrathful of all beasts, the Lamb, the Lamb of God, the justice of the living God.

And we remember that now is the time when we can tell people to repent, as Thomas was saying this morning, turn to Jesus and face Him and be redeemed and saved and know that great salvation and meet the angels that are spoken about in this passage.

[32 : 42] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, help us to recognize and know and understand the mystery and sometimes the mysticism in your word as well as the simplicity and help us to recognize the great spiritual truths that come from insiders that do reflect physically and outwardly in our lives the way we act and react and respond and even in our faces which so often speak to others about our lives and our souls and our attitudes and our foundation.

So Lord, help us, we pray. We don't want to be hypocrites. We don't have false faces. We don't want to have slapstick faces. We don't want to pretend there's not trouble and sadness and tears

and need and doubt.

But we want people to see that we are honest. We want people to see that we are hopeful, that we are people who have a deep trust and a peace and a serenity that comes from knowing Jesus, whatever we face in our lives.

And Lord, give us that passion and that urgency to share the gospel and the days that you've given to us, precious days, few days, to share our faith. May we not panic about that, may we not be despairing about it, but may we just be happy and know that it is your job to bring people to faith, but you use us in our lives and as we seek to be obedient to Jesus Christ our Lord and to be full of the Holy Spirit, strength and grace and wisdom.

So help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.