

Stephen – the First Martyr Amongst Many

Introduction:

1. Stephen's final moments show his Christlike love for his enemies and his incredible vision of the glorified Jesus Christ standing at God's right hand to welcome him home.
2. Turn to your Bibles to **Acts 7:54-60** as we continue with Stephen
3. We come to a most significant moment in the history of the church.
4. The great work of the church from its inception has been a display of the glory of God, and the spread of the gospel as Jesus's final words were to commission to the church, recorded for us in this book.
5. **Acts 1:8** *"You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."*
6. Jesus knew that his own death on the cross would be a pattern for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth
7. **John 12:24:** *"Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it produces much grain and yields a harvest."*
8. In today's account, we're going to look at this beautiful account of the death of the man chosen by God to be the first Christian martyr.
9. Countless millions would follow in his footsteps.
10. Let's quickly review the context.
11. We first meet Stephen in **Acts 6**, as the church had a logistical problem - the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked.
12. Stephen was listed first as he was *"Full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, full of faith of the Holy Spirit and full of God's grace and power," Acts 6*
13. Stephen stood courageously in various synagogues, testifying by the power of the Holy Spirit to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even as he faced hostility from Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria, and from Asia.
14. His enemies organized themselves and moved through false witnesses, accusing him of a fourfold blasphemy: blasphemy against God, against Moses, against the law of Moses, and against the temple.
15. When he was arraigned, everyone who looked at him saw that his face was like an angel's, glowing, like Moses's.
16. The high priest fiercely asked him, *"Are these charges true?"*
17. **Acts 7** is Stephen's brilliant defense.
18. As we've said, Stephen, I believe, had four goals.
19. First, he wanted to seize and hold their attention.
20. Secondly, he defends himself against the blasphemy charge
21. Thirdly, he wanted to convict them of their pattern of sin, which was traced back to their ancestors of resisting God and the Holy Spirit, and ultimately their sin of rejecting and crucifying Jesus.
22. Finally, to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior.
23. He attains the first three of these goals in **verses 2-53**.
24. He seizes their attention, he holds their attention by rehearsing one of their favorite topics, which is the story of their Jewish ancestors, of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

25. He defends himself by speaking reverently about God, calling Him the God of Glory, and reverently about Moses, the law, and the temple.

26. But he's *"boiling the frog,"* so to speak, by drawing them in little by little; he's building a case toward an explosive end.

27. Then he finishes with these dramatic words: ***"You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you're 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."*** (verses 51 -53)

28. The fourth goal – the proclaiming of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, will be until his stoning

29. This charge drives the Jews into a frenzy, and we're going to see a series of contrasts between Stephen and his enemies.

I. Filled with Rage vs. Filled with the Spirit:

1. We see this series of contrasts, first filled with rage versus the spirit.

2. ***Verse 51-54, "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."***

3. The cause of their rage was rebellion against God.

4. Stephen accused them of the sins of their fathers, showing that their ancestors always resist the Holy Spirit.

5. There was never a prophet they did not persecute

6. At every stage of Stephen's ministry, they were impotent; paralyzed to refute him

7. In ***Luke 21:15, Jesus said, "I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."***

8. Repentance is a gift of God's grace.

9. If I could just make an application point to you, if God sends someone in your life to point out your sin, don't respond like this. *"I didn't do it. It's not true."*

II. Spiritual Blindness vs. Heavenly Vision:

1. The next contrast is spiritual blindness versus heavenly vision.

2. ***Verse 55 -57, "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. He said, 'Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' But they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and rushed together at him."***

3. A stiff neck means they're rebellious; uncircumcised hearts and ears mean they're insensitive to spiritual truth. This is what the unbelieving Jewish nation has always been like.

4. Isaiah made this clear - ***"Be ever hearing but never understanding, be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make these people's hearts callous, make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."*** (Isaiah 6)

5. With Jesus' trial high priest cuts through all of the red tape and says, ***"Are you the Christ? The Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," Jesus said.***

6. That's God's name. ***"I am. And you'll see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven." The high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we need any more witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy,"*** he said to the Sanhedrin.

6. This is the completion of the fourth and final phase
 7. Let's talk for a moment about the glories of what Stephen saw.
 8. **Verse 55, "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."**
 9. He saw the heavens open.
 10. It's another verse that shows some kind of a wall or a membrane or a barrier between the five-sense world and the spiritual realm beyond.
 11. We saw the heavens at Jesus' baptism torn open, and the Spirit descended as a dove and remained on Jesus.
 12. Stephen saw it at the end of his life, and he proclaimed it, **"Behold I see heaven open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God."**
 13. Interestingly, he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
 14. In **Hebrews 10, 11, and 12**, the author makes much of this standing-sitting thing. He says, **"Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties."**
 15. He's the head of His church, and He cares how His church is treated.
 16. You remember what He said to Saul of Tarsus? **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"**
 17. In His role as king and protector of the church, He's pictured here standing very interested in the martyrdom of His witness, Stephen.
 18. And one day He will lead a heavenly army at the end of the age and rescue His church from the Antichrist and the force of evil that will try to obliterate her from the surface of the earth.
- Satanic Hate-Filled Murder vs. Christ-like Love:**
1. The spiritual dimensions of this scene, **verse 57- 58, "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."**
 2. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit of God, while his enemies were filled with the spirit of the devil.
 3. Jesus says this to his Jewish enemies directly, probably some of the same people in **John 8:44, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks of himself. He's a liar and a murderer."**
 4. In their demonized rage, they rush him.
 5. The same Greek word is used of that herd of pigs that died when Jesus healed the demoniac of the legion of demons.
 6. It's openly demonic, the way they dragged this godly man by the feet out of the city.
 7. Stoning took place in this way: they would bring someone to a small cliff, maybe a little more than twice the height of a man, and they'd push the person down onto a pile of stones.
 8. The first witness would then drop a large stone on the person's head or on his chest and perhaps finish him off.
 9. If that didn't, then all the witnesses would keep throwing stones until he was dead.
 10. It says all the witnesses are laying their clothes at the feet of Saul.
 11. His dying words are like those of the Savior - **verse 59**, while they're stoning him, **"Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.'"**

12. We believe that there is a material part of us, our bodies, and then there's a non-material part of us, our souls, our spirits, and the one isn't housed in the other like in a tent or dwelling place.

13. We believe the removal of the spirit, that's death, and the spirit goes to God who gave it.

14. We believe that with Christians, their spirits are instantly perfected and made ready for immediate face-to-face fellowship with God; that's the first step of glorification.

15. They become spirits - we're told, absent from the body, present with the Lord.

16. ***"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then verse 60, "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"***

IV. Death vs. Life:

1. The final contrast is death versus life.

2. Stephen's life, if I can say this, is really just beginning at that moment.

3. No more death, mourning, crying, or pain for that man as he slipped the bands of physical life to a world we can only barely conceive of.

4. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus warned that persecution would come

5. I'm like, wait a minute, Jesus. ***"They're going to put some of you to death, but not a hair of your head will perish."***

6. Help me with that - It must be your resurrection hair.

7. What about Paul? Saul of Tarsus stood there witnessing the death of this godly man.

8. ***Chapter 8:1, "Saul was there giving approval to his death."***

9. St. Augustine, writing, said, ***"The church owes the salvation of Paul to the prayers of Stephen." "Lord, don't hold this sin against him. I mean, you realize it's a sin. Lord, don't hold this sin against him."***

10. When Jesus stopped Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and said, ***"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"***

11. Tertullian famously said in the year 197, during a particularly vicious persecution by the Roman Empire, he said, ***"Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust. Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent, the oftener we're mowed down by you, the more in number we grow, the blood of Christians is seed."***

12. ***Jesus said it better. "Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit."***

Application:

1. My top priority when I stand up here every week is to preach the simple and clear gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Stephen would want to tell all in this room how your sins can be forgiven one, and only one way, and that is by repentance and faith in the blood of Jesus.

3. Christians, what about you?

4. Paul made a statement in ***Philippians 3: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death. And so somehow to attain the resurrection from the dead."***

5. Many Christians around the world are in different contexts than we are.

6. They are persecuted for their faith.

7. We need to pray for them, as we do with the handout each week.