



The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 6:8-8:1

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This morning, beloved, we are going to look intently at the death of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. It is a riveting and powerful story – the story of a man who stands before us in the pages of Scripture as a lesson for all of us in how to live well and to die well. It is a story that is both sobering and triumphant.

About this text and its importance in the history of the church of Jesus Christ, the great British preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: “the church had to fight for her life from the very beginning. From the moment it was born, the church has had to face a world that has done everything it could to exterminate it.” What he says is true. There is no way to overstate the hatred of the gospel, the hatred of Christ and of His followers that filled the hearts of the Sanhedrin in the several months that had followed the resurrection of Christ and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the incredible growth of the church as a result. As we look at this account of Stephen, we should remember that barely had he come to know Christ and the gospel by faith, barely had he embraced Jesus as the fulfillment of all of the promises and prophecies of the OT than His blood would be shed, the first martyr of the church, in holding fast to His Lord and King. This morning in Acts marks a turning point. Up until now, the opposition had arisen mainly from the Sanhedrin, but now we see it beginning among the common people of Jerusalem. Up until this point, the Sanhedrin had used coercion, threats, jailing, and beatings in the attempt to silence the church’s gospel witness; now they will resort to murder. Up until this point, the target for the attacks had been the Apostles themselves, those who carried the weight of the ministry of the Word of God, but now, the brunt of their attacks would fall for the first time on a layman, on a member of the church of Christ. Tertullian of Carthage, one of the early church fathers once made a statement that in the light of this text, the church should never forget: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” It is a maxim first proven true by Stephen in Jerusalem.

Let's pray together that God will use this time for making much of Christ, much of Himself and His glory as we look at this text, and that He will use this account to strengthen our own faith and to give us courage and theological steel to our backbones and then let's break open the bread of life together. Pray with me.

The Background (8-15) Look with me beginning in verse 8, and let's get the background of this scene that we are looking at. "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." (Acts 6:8-15, ESV)

Luke describes Stephen as "full of grace and power." Reaching back to verse 5, where Luke sort of sets him apart from the other men who were chosen to care for the widows, we see him described as a man "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." The word full translates the Greek word "pleres" which means to be completely filled up, to be dominated by or under the control of something. When Luke describes Stephen in this way, he is saying a mouthful.

When Luke says that Stephen is "full of faith," what he is saying is that what controlled and defined Stephen, what shaped and fashioned him was, first of all, faith. That seems sort of obvious, doesn't it? It is the very definition of a Christian, right? You must have faith. It is by faith in Christ that we are saved. Even the weakest and most immature faith, if it is placed in Christ alone, is saving faith. But what Luke wants us to understand as we consider Stephen is that he has a faith that was unmixed with doubt, a faith that was unwavering, a faith that in every respect controlled His life. His faith in Christ as Lord and Messiah, as God's own Son, in His saving death, resurrection and exaltation, His faith in God's sovereignty over history and over his individual life, his faith that he belonged exclusively and forever to God formed HIS thinking, his emotions, his will – not the other way around. He was full of faith.

And Luke says that Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit.” That is, his life gave evidence that he was controlled by the Holy Spirit. In other words, he was obedient to God. One of the chief evidences that someone is filled with the Holy Spirit is that they are obedient and submitted to God’s revealed will and that was true of Stephen. He was mastered by the Holy Spirit and lived in a way that was pleasing to the Father. He lived an authentic life because he was full of the very life of God.

More than that, he was “full of grace.” In other words, he was kind and gracious, easily to be entreated, forgiving and welcoming in his manner. He was winsome in other words, so what happens to him, the death that he dies had nothing to do with his own personality. He was not unnecessarily abrasive, not pompous or pretentious, but the life of Christ shown through him.

Because of all of this, he was “full of power.” The power of God was with Him, the life and presence of God was evident, so much so that he was performing signs and wonders. Luke doesn’t elaborate on what he was doing exactly, but that is not the point. The point is that God was with him and it was obvious by his life. His life was, in every respect, clearly and obviously founded upon Christ.

Now it is important for us to understand something from the very outset. None of these characteristics of Stephen are natural traits, none of them. They had nothing to do with his upbringing, nothing to do with his culture, nothing to do with his DNA and not to do with any common graces. His was a character shaped by the ministry of the Word of God through the Apostles and the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying him. His life was the result of the Word of God, which he had been taught and which he had received by faith, dwelling richly in him. This is the kind of life that we should all desire, long for, aspire to, strive for. Don’t you want a life like that? I do. It is an attractive life.

It is in the course of his everyday life in Christ, living for the praise of His name, living by faith and the life of the Spirit of God within him, that Stephen found himself in this confrontation that we will read about. He is accused by the people of the synagogue of the Freedmen – that is Greek speaking Jews who were freed slaves and their descendants, in this case composed of those from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia – he is accused by the people of this synagogue

of speaking blasphemous things about Moses, God, the law and the temple. Now how did Stephen come to be accused of such things? Well, it was the custom of some believers to continue to attend the synagogue to hear the Word of God read and expounded upon. They would use that opportunity, the discussion that would take place in the synagogue as an opportunity to speak of Christ as the fulfillment of the Law, to speak of Christ as the new temple of God –the meeting place of His people who made the old temple obsolete, to speak of Christ as the Messiah, to preach that Christ was the end of the law for righteousness for those who believe, that Jesus superseded Moses as the prophet of who Moses spoke, and instituted the New Covenant that was fulfillment of the old, that salvation was gift of God’s grace through faith in the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ and so the sacrifices of the temple were now obsolete. They would take the opportunity to explain the OT in light of Christ, engaging their family, neighbors and friends with gospel truth.

Now understand, Stephen was not a preacher, not a minister of the Word in the sense that the Apostles were. He did not have the formal ministry of the Apostles, but in the ordinary course of life, in the community of worship, in the context of this synagogue, he was speaking for Christ, pointing to the Scriptures, pleading with his friends to be saved, engaging the unsaved family members of the widows over whom he had been appointed watchcare. He was simply living a faithful life before the Lord.

At first, the people tried to debate with him, to dispute with him and poke holes in his theology, but they couldn’t. He knew the Word of God, the ministry of the Word had had its way in his mind and heart. They could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. The truth that Stephen preached convicted these men of their sins and threatened their pride, so they tried to refute it. When that failed, they attacked the messenger. They did not bother to see if Scripture predicted such things about Messiah. So what did they do? They turned to the only thing that those without the truth, who cannot win the argument do – they turned to personal attacks, to lies, to false witnesses and stirring up the scribes and elders, they had Stephen brought before the Sanhedrin. He had been faithful over the small things in the synagogue and now the Lord was giving him the blessing of testifying to Him before the Sanhedrin. They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

What does that mean? His face was like that of an angel – what does an angel look like? I don't know, but that isn't really the question. The real question is this -- Who else had a face that shown like, that shines like an angel? -- and the answer is Moses, and when did his face shine like that? When he came down from the mountain after meeting with God. The point that Luke makes is that though they may not have understood what they saw, the Sanhedrin was looking upon the face of a man who had spent time with God. What follows in chapter 7 is the faithful testimony of a man who knew the glory of God, a man who could say: "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6, ESV) This is the background that leads to

Stephen's Faithful Testimony to the Glory of God (7:1-53) Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin faced with charges of blasphemy against Moses, against God, against the Law and against the temple. We read: "And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"" (Acts 7:1, ESV) The confrontation begins and on trial for his very life, Stephen does not make a defense for himself, doesn't try to wriggle off the hook. Instead He gives a powerful testimony to the glory of God in redemption. He is not looking to be acquitted before this court; He is looking to give a faithful account before the Lord.

As we look through this testimony, I want you to be watching for the major themes that are woven throughout Stephen's words. He does not shy away from the truth but powerfully that God is the sovereign author of salvation and the only way you come to Him is in humility and submission to His truth. He declares that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or building like the temple. He is not the private possession of any people. He will make clear that the Jews were given the tabernacle and later the temple but that they were temporary and symbolic, pointing forward to fulfillment in Christ. He will fearlessly confront the habitual idolatry of the nation of Israel, even up until that very day. He will pointedly testify to the truth that throughout the history of the nation of Israel, God raised up deliverers for His people but the Jews had stubbornly rejected them and refused to receive God's truth and revelation through them. And he will come to the pointed conclusion that it is not he who is unfaithful to God, but them. Just like their fathers before them, the Sanhedrin never understood God, the law of God, and not the grace of God, supremely revealed in Christ. They were the true blasphemers of God, of His Christ, and of His way of salvation and of the worship that He deserves, of Moses, of the Law and of the Temple.

What we are seeing in the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the disciples when He said I Luke 21: "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives." (Luke 21:12–19, ESV) This is not a prepared sermon by Stephen, but a Spirit-empowered, Christ-empowered testimony of eternal truth.

Pick it up in verse 2: "And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'" (Acts 7:2–3, ESV) From the very outset, Stephen establishes two things. First he makes clear that the story is all about God, the God of glory. It wasn't about the Sanhedrin, their pride, their fame, their glory or even about Israel – not primarily. It was and is all about the God of glory. The Sanhedrin thought that they and their traditions and the temple were the center and the measure of things but they were not. The central issue of all of life is that the God of glory has made Himself known. This is why we worship, why we sing, why we pray, and why we preach – because God has made himself known. Ultimately through Jesus Christ we have come to see the glory, the majesty, the wonder, the mercy and grace, the truth, the power of God and more. This is about the God of glory. And second, Stephen makes clear that everything was according to the divine initiative, to God's initiative. It is God who appears, who reveals, who calls, who promises, who saves. And it has nothing to do with human works or worthiness. Everything, especially regarding salvation, finds its genesis in God. God came to Abraham when he was an idolater and called him to come out of the land of his fathers and into a relationship with Him and to another land God would show him and what did Abraham do?

"Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' And he gave him the covenant of circumcision.

And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.” (Acts 7:4–8, ESV) What did Abraham do? He obeyed God. Despite never owning one square foot of the ground, despite having no offspring and the prophecy that his offspring, which as yet did not exist, would be enslaved and afflicted for 400 years before receiving the inheritance in the Promised Land – when there was no tangible proof of what God was saying to Him, still Abraham believed God and His promises and the evidence that he believed was that He entered into covenant with God through circumcision. And what did God do? He kept His promise. God did throughout history all that He promised to do.

The underlying implication here is obvious. These men claimed to be “sons of Abraham.” They made a great to-do about being in his lineage. But Stephen is starting to build his case that they were nothing like Abraham. Abraham believed God and His promises, despite having very little physical evidence, and it was counted to him as righteousness. These men who had been the recipients of far greater proof, in the person and words and life and works of Jesus Christ, than Abraham was given and yet in the face of such overwhelming evidence that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, they refused to believe. They were not the children of Abraham -- “just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness...Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” (Galatians 3:6–7, ESV)

Then He moved forward in redemptive history to Joseph. Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob from Jacob came the patriarchs. Stephen says: ““And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.” (Acts 7:9–16, ESV) God raised up Joseph to be the one through whom the nation would be delivered from the deadly famine that was going to come upon the land and gave Him a vision of His place as the leader of his family. How did the patriarchs respond? With jealousy, so much so that first desired to kill him before selling him into slavery. Despite their jealousy and sin, God’s

eternal plan could not be denied and He was with Joseph and made him great and the instrument of the nation's survival.

Again, see the connection. What was it that made the Sanhedrin rise up against Christ? Why were they persecuting the church so wickedly? – it was jealousy. And just as the jealousy of Joseph's brothers could not prevail over the plan of God to exalt Joseph and save His people, neither could their jealousy impede God's work to exalt Christ, to save His people and to build up His Kingdom. Stephen is presenting a strong case. They are faithless, jealous. Then he moves to their hero, Moses. Far from blaspheming Moses, he speaks strong words of approval and honor. He says:

““But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.” (Acts 7:17–29, ESV)

Stephen describes the divine providence and blessing of God that rested upon Moses, how God was at work to prepare this first great leader for the nation, how he fashioned him for his role as deliverer and savior of the nation. How he was willing to lay aside the rights that were his as a son of Pharaoh in order to redeem the nation from bondage. As the writer of Hebrews describes it: “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” (Hebrews 11:24–25, ESV) And how did the nation respond? They “rejected”

him and “thrust him aside” and Moses became an exile. He was not the deliverer that they wanted or thought they needed.

Stephen goes on: ““Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ — this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.” (Acts 7:30–38, ESV)

The nation rejected him, but God was with Moses and He appeared to him, meeting with Him on holy ground, ground made holy not by a temple but by the very real presence of God with him. And the very one that nation rejected, the deliverer that they thought they did not need, God sent to them to be both ruler and redeemer. By the power of God, Moses worked miracles, signs and wonders never seen before but Moses said to them in effect, “I am not the great Deliverer, not the great Redeemer, not the final Savior. He is yet to come. God will raise up for you another one, a prophet like me but far greater than me.” He was pointing to Christ. Moses was the one who met with the preincarnate Christ face to face, who received living oracles, not dead law, but living truth from God, the Law, that pointed to Christ, to the prophet that was to come. How did the nation respond to Moses, to this gift from God?

“Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: “ ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the

wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.” (Acts 7:39–43, ESV) The nation, for the most part, refused Moses, thrust him aside and why? Because they were idolaters at heart. They refused to follow the way of God and they looked for the first opportunity to rebel against him, making a golden calf and worshipping it as God. Stephen says in effect, “It has been the bane of our people since we were delivered from the slavery of Egypt.” Quoting from Amos, he reminds them that idolatry and the rejection of God and the heart of what Moses taught is what eventually led to the discipline of God and their exile from the nation to begin with. But he isn’t finished. He says:

““Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, 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 what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’” (Acts 7:44–50, ESV) Stephen is saying in effect, “You think you are safe and that you are the people of God because you have the temple. But are you really? God once made his presence known with us in the tabernacle. He even made his presence known to us in the temple that Solomon built. But God did not live there and He certainly does not live in this temple made by Herod. You do not have God. He is not your possession.” Quoting from Isaiah, Stephen makes it clear that God is far greater than the temple. How can the God of the universe dwell in a house made with human hands. “You miss it. You do not understand,” Stephen is saying. God does not dwell in a house -- “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15, ESV) God dwells with the humble, with the broken, with those who know their need, with the contrite, with repentant. God dwells with these people. He revives them, makes them live. “This is who God dwells with and you are none of these things!” And now, Stephen comes to the climax.

““You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.””

(Acts 7:51–53, ESV) Stephen calls them what they are. He thunders the truth in their ears and he does it with a broken heart. He tells them that they are not the sons of Abraham, not the children of God by faith. Instead they are stiff-necked – just like the rejecters of old, just like their faithless fathers before them -- “For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.” (Hebrews 4:2, NKJV) They are uncircumcised in their hearts and ears where it really matters. They hear but do not hear, they profess to believe but do not believe. They have rejected God and the overtures of the Spirit through the life of Christ over and over again. Just as their fathers persecuted the prophets of God, they have murdered the very Son of God, the Righteous One – these who had the Law but did not see that the law was “our guardian, our schoolmaster, our tutor until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” (Galatians 3:24, ESV)

Feel the passion of Stephen here. This is no dry theology lecture but a powerful witness to the glory of God in Christ. In Jesus the law has been fulfilled. All of their ceremonial law was done away with in Christ. The temple and temple worship and the law could not save them. It all pointed to Christ who Jesus had fulfilled the Law and the promises of God with His righteousness. Jesus is the Son of God who has taken on human flesh and had obeyed the law perfectly and died a sacrifice for sinners. Therefore, a new and living way had been opened unto God by Him. If they would humble themselves, repent and believe on Him they would be saved and they would become worshipers of the true and living God, and become a part of the spiritual temple that God was building. Here is the grace of God to offer them life once more, but their hearts were hard, their ears deaf to the overtures of grace. See with me last, the

Earthly Rejection and Heavenly Reception of Stephen (54-60)

“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”” (Acts 7:54–56, ESV) What a contrast. The Sanhedrin, filled with rage and hatred, grinding their teeth at the words of grace, at the messenger of grace. But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, is another picture all together. He sees heaven opened and Christ standing at the right hand of God. Condemned by this earthly court, Stephen is approved by the Judge of all men, his advocate with the Father, who rises to stand in his defense. The one who said: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before

my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32–33, ESV) Christ rises to meet Stephen, the first martyr of the church and Stephen’s eyes are filled not with visions of the angry mob, but with the beatific vision of Christ. The one who had filled his vision in life, filled his vision at death.

“But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (Acts 7:57–58, ESV) The crowd, anxious to silence the truth, in frenzy lay hold of Stephen and carrying out of the city, they cast him down and with rocks that would seal their own doom, begin to stone the man of God. It is sweaty business to kill a man, to stone a prophet, and so they cast off their garments at the feet of Saul, who “approved of his execution.” (Acts 8:1, ESV)

“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59–60, ESV) Stephen does not revile, does not gnash his teeth in return, but entrusts Himself to the Righteous Judge, to Christ. And he pleads for the salvation for the very ones who were murdering him – for their repentance unto life and for the grace of God to be poured upon them. And his prayer would be answered in the life of at least one – Saul, whom we know as the Apostle Paul. Stephen could not be more Christlike in his life or in his death and that, beloved, is the point. He could say as Paul --oh what a grace and evidence of the wonder of God’s mercy that Paul would one day say it – “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” (Acts 20:24, ESV)

There are a great many implications that come out of the death of Stephen and we will get into some of them next week. But what strikes my soul as we read this today is this thought: Oh that we would be an army of Stephens, an army of people who do not count our own lives as precious, who do not seek to hold on to what is perishing, who do not seek to keep ourselves safe but who are abandoned to Christ, abandoned to His glory, abandoned to the praise of His glory. Oh that we would fearlessly proclaim with our lives and our lips, with passionate resolve and with breaking hearts the salvation that alone is found in our Lord and King Jesus Christ. What would God do with such resolve? How might Christ be glorified in such lives?

Oh how little we often reflect the fathers of our faith in faithfulness and abandonment to Christ. How easily we are discouraged or dismayed. How often we complain of our lot, our trials, our hardships? I say this with full awareness of the hardships we often face, but they are so inconsequential before the face of this man, Stephen, who gives his life for his Savior in obedience, counting it an honor and a privilege; and he falls asleep, and Jesus is there to hold him and draw him to Himself.

Oh beloved, how often do I fail to die to myself, trying to protect my life, my reputation, my ease? How often do I fail to live courageously for my Lord in the face of lesser challenges, my Lord whose death ended once and for all the fear of death for those who trust in Him?

Stephen, the Apostles, they convict me beloved and I hope they convict you as well. They convict me to take up my cross and follow Christ. It is worth death, or a thousand little deaths day-by-day to have Christ, to have His favor, His approval, His love. May we all live lives that are full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, full of power so that the name of Christ, the only Savior, the only Lord, the only Worthy One would be emblazoned upon this earth. God bless us as we do.

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