

Last week's Msg was - “Called to Serve”
& today we take that “Serving” to a “Whole New Level”

Like so much of Acts - today we see the Historical Example
of a Number of Great N.T. truths

We could choose many - but the one that sticks out to me is

Philippians 1:21 (ESV)

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

That verse was written by PAUL - Formally SAUL of Tarsus
& today - for the FIRST time - we're going to MEET Saul

& there is a Very Good Chance - That what we see unfold today
Laid the Foundation - Literally in Blood

For Paul's commitment to say:

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”

Today we meet STEPHEN - Who had a “Direction Setting” influence
on both Saul of Tarsus - & on the Spread of Christianity

& I PROMISE, as our text unfolds - that we'll see
for Stephen - - *to LIVE was Christ & to DIE was GAIN*

Let's Pray

I'm going to primarily use the NLT today
because we have a HUGE section of Scripture to cover - ok?

The name Stephen (Stephanos) means - "A Crown"

It's the word used for a crown given to a Leader
or to the winner of an Athletic Competition

& Stephen LIVED UP to his name - both as a pivotal leader
AND as the FIRST in the NT Church to finish his race
& receive the Martyr's crown

In our Msg last week - Stephen was one of the SEVEN
Greek-Speaking Jews (Hellenists) who were chosen
to care for the Physical needs of the church

In Acts 6:3 - these men were to be
full of the Spirit and wisdom

in Acts 6:5 we first meet Stephen - when we read
. . .and they chose Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit)

& then - as we open our text today - we read in

in Acts 6:8 (nlt)

8 Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed
amazing miracles and signs among the people.

That gives us a little "picture" of WHO Stephen was

FULL of The Holy Spirit

FULL of Wisdom & Faith

FULL of God's Grace & Power . . .

AND . . . he was performing
amazing miracles & signs among the people

THIS is a man who is: **FULL** of the **Life of Jesus Christ**
this is an **incredible description** of Stephen

& If **WE** desire to say - "**For me to Live is Christ**"
then **THESE** are the descriptive words

That we should be **PRAYING** other people would **see in US**

FULL of **The Holy Spirit**

FULL of **Wisdom - - Faith - - God's Grace - - & God's Power**

& **Stephen** today - is going to **set** the **PERFECT Example**
of **the person** who has made **the commitment** . . .

Philippians 1:21 (ESV)

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

& So - Because of Stephen's commitment to Christ

He had a **Wonderful life**

He had **NO Problems - NO Trials**

He always had a **New Cadillac** in the garage . . .

Oh no, sorry . . . that's the FALSE teaching !!

The truth is - **BECAUSE** of Stephen's **commitment to Christ**

He was **USED BY GOD** to Immeasurably **IMPACT**

the **people** around him - **including** a Pharisee named **SAUL**

& not only did he **IMPACT** the people around him

But he also made an **INCREDIBLE IMPACT** for the Kingdom of God

It all starts - with some good old fashioned - **HATERS**
If you've ever **been** in the **ministry** - you've **MET** these people

They're **EASY to SPOT** . . . cause . . . **they HATE you**

& the **Enemy** wants to use them **for EVIL** in your life
But **God** wants to use them - **for GOOD**

& we'll **definitely see that** - as we continue

Acts 6:9 (nlt)

9 But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia (Kil-ik-ee-ah), and the province of Asia.

This was the **Synagogue Stephen** attended

Remember - initially the Christians **DID NOT**
stop attending the **Synagogue's**

Because they knew **Jesus**
as **the FULFILLMENT** of the **Law** & Jewish **worship**

So **this** was **Stephen's Synagogue**
AND, it was a **Hellenistic** (Greek-Speaking) **Synagogue**

Remember it was the "**Hellenists**"
who stirred up **trouble** last week

& **here** they are again - - -
& **they're** about to stir up **MORE than trouble** this time

Just one other thing about this Synagogue

MOST commentators believe - that a man named "SAUL of Tarsus" was a Leading Pharisee in THIS Synagogue

Saul was a Hellenistic (Greek-Speaking) Jew & Tarsus was the Capital of Cilicia (Kil-ik-ee-ah)

& so - It's Very Likely - SAUL was at the HEAD of these arguments & debates with Stephen regarding Christ

Now this group might have been LED by SAUL of Tarsus but they were NO MATCH for the Spiritual Gifts God gave Stephen

Acts 6:10 (nlt)

10 None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

That SOUNDS Great !!

But . . . here's what I've found about HATERS

Talking to them - EVEN Led by The Spirit & Full of God's Wisdom very often - DOES NOT change their hearts

Often - what it does - is take their Attacks to the Next Level which is exactly what we see here

Acts 6:11-12 (nlt)

11 So they (probably SAUL included) persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God."

12 This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

Pls Listen to me - **OFTEN**, the way **the ENEMY** takes out **Leaders** is to **get people** in the church to **LIE** about them

& **Very OFTEN** these people **THINK** they're actually **"Doing God's Work"**

& **so** they **think** that "**Stretching the Truth**" is OK **as long** as the Leader they **want Brought down** - is **Brought down**

& So - **let me** re-iterate **HOW** you can **KNOW** **whether** someone who is **Criticizing** a Leader

is being used by **GOD for GOOD** (*cause God does use critics*) or is being used by the **DEVIL for EVIL**

IF they are being used by **GOD** - they are talking to the **LEADER**

IF they are being used by the **DEVIL** - they are talking to **YOU**

After more than **20 years** of dealing with **HATERS** in the ministry **that's** as **clear** as I can **make it**

So - **the HATERS** persuade others to **LIE** about Stephen in order to **STIR UP** the **Sanhedrin** (Jewish Council)

& they have Stephen arrested & brought before

The **SAME High Council** - **JESUS CHRIST** stood before

The **SAME High Council** - **PETER & JOHN** & the Apostles stood before - *these are the same guys*

& again - **the Enemy** is attempting to **Bring EVIL** **But God** is Orchestrating some **Serious GOOD**

Acts 6:13-14 (nlt)

13 The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses.

14 We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

This is a **classic approach** of **Haters** - **still used today**

They're **taking a PORTION** of a statement that **WAS probably MADE** by Stephen - & **Contorting it into a LIE**

But it **doesn't even matter** - because **at THIS POINT** the **Lying Witnesses** notice - **NO ONE is looking at them**

They're all **looking at Stephen** - because . . . **he's GLOWING**

Acts 6:15 (nlt)

15 At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

I think **God was** (yet again) **giving** the **Jewish Council** the **chance** to **Repent** - & **Be Saved**

But (yet again) they **PUSH Forward** with their own **Agenda**

Acts 7:1 (nlt)

1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these accusations true?"

Now - **This** is **ONE** of the **GREAT LESSONS** in this text

→ → →

The High Priest asks Stephen *if the accusations are true*
& Stephen DOES NOT Even ADDRESS the Accusations

He DOES NOT Defend his Honor, his Character, his Reputation

He recognizes this event is NOT about HIM Personally
He is part of a Much Larger Work that GOD is doing

& so he doesn't even ADDRESS the LIES

I believe he said One Thing to himself
“Stephen - - IT'S TIME TO PREACH !!”

So we come to another
of the GREAT SERMONS in the book of Acts

Stephen realizes he's been called *“For Such a Time as This”*

This is NOT about his REPUTATION - or the LIES
OR his LIFE for that matter

This is about The GOSPEL of Jesus Christ
& He's NOT gonna MISS the opportunity to SPEAK OUT

He's got the entire SANHEDRIN (ruling council of the Jews)
in front of him - & the High Priest has ASKED HIM to speak

& So - Stephen's going to Address THREE AREAS
of FALSE CONFIDENCE that the Jews TRUSTED IN

He's going to address THREE things
that the Jews put their CONFIDENCE IN - INSTEAD of
LOOKING for the Promised Messiah to come

There's another neat "Side Note" here

People often get mad at me for addressing things that I know are going on in the church in my messages

But THAT is EXACTLY what Stephen is doing here

He KNOWS what's going on in the hearts of the Jews & he addresses it straight on

& sometimes - when I do that - I get the feeling I may end up the same place Stephen did

Here are the Three FALSE CONFIDENCES of the Jews:

The Promised Land

Moses & The Law

The Temple

& Stephen is going to address EACH of them Directly & show them WHY their CONFIDENCE in them - is FALSE

FIRST - the Jews felt they were "OK with God" because they were IN The Promised Land

Acts 7:2-36 (nlt)

2 This was Stephen's reply: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran.

God 1st revealed Himself to Abraham - OUTSIDE the Promised Land

3 God told him, ‘Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’

4 So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.

5 “But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet.

POINT - God was WITH Abraham,

even tho Abraham was NOT IN the Promised Land . . . in fact

6 God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years.

7 ‘But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,’ God said, ‘and in the end they will come out and worship me here in this place.’

8 “God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. So when Abraham became the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day. And the practice was continued when Isaac became the father of Jacob, and when Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Israelite nation.

& the 12 Patriarch’s they ALSO were NOT in the Promised Land

**9 “These patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him
10 and rescued him from all his troubles. And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.**

11 “But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery, and our ancestors ran out of food.

12 Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons—our ancestors—to buy some.

13 The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they were introduced to Pharaoh.

14 Then Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt, seventy-five persons in all.

15 So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did our ancestors.

16 Their bodies were taken to Shechem (in the promised land) and buried in the tomb Abraham had bought for a certain price from Hamor's sons in Shechem.

And then **EVEN MOSES** & the people of the **EXODUS** - -

God was **With Them** - - **OUTSIDE the Promised Land**

17 “As the time drew near when God would fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased.

18 But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.

19 This king exploited our people and oppressed them, forcing parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die.

20 “At that time Moses was born—a beautiful child in God’s eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months.

21 When they had to abandon him, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and raised him as her own son.

22 Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action.

23 “One day when Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel.

24 He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. So Moses came to the man’s defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian.

25 Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn’t.

26 “The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. ‘Men,’ he said, ‘you are brothers. Why are you fighting each other?’

27 “But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside. ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ he asked.

28 ‘Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?’

29 When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian. There his two sons were born.

30 “Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush.

31 When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he went to take a closer look, the voice of the Lord called out to him,

32 ‘I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses shook with terror and did not dare to look.

33 “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.

34 I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now go, for I am sending you back to Egypt.’

(God saving His people - Outside the Promised Land)

35 “So God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected when they demanded, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their ruler and savior.

36 And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years. (OUTSIDE the Promised Land)

Now - **THAT** is a **LOT of verses** to deal with **just** the issue of **the PROMISED LAND**

But we have to remember two things;

#1) The Promised Land was a **huge deal** to the Jews (& still is)

#2) Their CONFIDENCE of **being in** the Promised Land

Had **REPLACED** their **HOPE** in God’s **Promised Messiah**

Maybe **this is like** us thinking we're **OK with God** because we grew up in a "**Christian Home**" or **Christian Environment**

We're **NOT OK** with God because of **ANYTHING Exterior** **NOT** our Christian **Environment**, Christian **Home**, or *anything else*

But **ONLY** "*OK with God*" by putting our **FULL FAITH** in **Jesus Christ** as our **Messiah**

& so Stephen '*handles*' the **FALSE CONFIDENCE** in **the Promised Land**

NEXT - Stephen is going to Address the Jews **FALSE CONFIDENCE** in **Moses & the Law**

& he **STARTS** with a **Prophecy** from Moses - **ABOUT Jesus Christ**

Acts 7:37-43 (nlt)

37 "Moses himself told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.'

38 Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God's people in the wilderness, when the angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us.

Now Stephen's going to **REMIND them** - They **Think** their **CONFIDENCE** is in **Moses** - But they **didn't** even **LISTEN** to **HIM** !

39 "But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt.

40 They told Aaron, 'Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don't know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt.'

41 So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and celebrated over this thing they had made.

42 Then God turned away from them and abandoned them to serve the stars of heaven as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written, ‘Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?

43 No, you carried your pagan gods— the shrine of Molech, the star of your god Rephan (Rhai-phan), and the images you made to worship them. So I will send you into exile as far away as Babylon.’

The Jews put their CONFIDENCE in MOSES & the LAW

But **the Law** was never able to **save them**
& they **wouldn’t LISTEN** to **Moses** anyway

PLUS - Moses had **told them** to **LOOK** for **The Messiah**
whom they had **STOPPED** looking for

The Jews **FALSE CONFIDENCE** in the **LAW & MOSES**
Is a **little bit like us** thinking we’re **OK** if we **have a BIBLE**

& **thinking** we’re **really OK** if we **know** some of **the words**
& **especially** if our Bible **looks** real “**USED**”

But guys - we’re **only OK** - if we’re **actually**
APPLYING *God’s Word* to our **Lives**

Owning a Bible doesn’t count

Knowing what it says doesn’t count

Only BEING TRANSFORMED by it - **COUNTS**

Alright - **TWO** False Confidences - **DOWN** !

& the last **FALSE CONFIDENCE** the Jews "**Rested In**" was
The TEMPLE - & it's **Religious Ceremonies**

& so - Stephen's going to "**Address that too**" (*I like this guy*)

Acts 7:44-50 (nlt)

44 "Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses.

45 Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors in battle against the nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it stayed there until the time of King David.

46 "David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob.

47 But it was Solomon who actually built it.

48 However, the Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, (from ISA 66)

49 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?' asks the Lord. 'Could you build me such a resting place?

50 Didn't my hands make both heaven and earth?'

The Jews had **HUGE CONFIDENCE** in the Temple

& **as long** as the **Religious Ceremonies** were **going on**
in the **TEMPLE** - they **felt** they **MUST** be **OK** with God

Does that sound like **ANYTHING** we see today ??

How about people thinking they're **OK with God**
as long as they're **going to church**

As long as they're **going thru** the **MOTIONS**
they think they **MUST** be **OK** with God

GUYS - The Ceremonies of the Temple were to "Paint of Picture"
of what it "Looked Like" & what "It Meant"

to come into a Real & Personal Relationship with a Living God

The Ceremonies were never Meant to REPLACE
that Real & Personal Relationship with God

& it's the same with Church Today

Church was meant to DRAW us INTO
a Real & Personal Relationship with God

It was never meant to REPLACE
a Real & Personal Relationship with God

The Jews had allowed the Temple Ceremonies to REPLACE
their Personal Relationship with God

& if WE allow Church Ceremonies to REPLACE
our Personal Relationship with God

then we have the SAME FALSE CONFIDENCE
& we're in the SAME HOT WATER as the Jews were

& so now - Just in case they're NOT "Getting It"
Stephen is going to "Make it Really Clear"

They may KILL him for it
But Stephen's about to - "Speak the Truth"

& now - He's going to change the PRONOUNS from "THEY"
(meaning their ancestors) - to "YOU" (getting personal)

Acts 7:51-53 (nlt)

51 “You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you!

52 Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered.

53 You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

OK - **THAT** pretty much **SEALED** Stephen’s Fate

But God was calling Stephen to a **GREATER WORK**

- 1) God needed to Spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world**
- & 2) God needed to Leave A Permanent Mark on a Young Pharisee named SAUL of Tarsus**

& **BOTH** of those things - we’re **About To Happen**
But **FIRST** - Stephen had to “**Finish His Race**”

Acts 7:54 (nlt)

54 The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. (Lit - grinding their teeth)

They were **INFURIATED** - They were in a **RAGE**

Which was just what **SAUL**, & the **OTHERS**, wanted
AND - **ALSO** - it was **just** what the **DEVIL** wanted . . .

But **GOD** had a **DIFFERENT PLAN**
& He had **PREPARED** Stephen for it

Acts 7:55-56 (nlt)

55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit (just like he has been since we met him), ***gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand.***

56 And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

Full of the Holy Spirit - Stephen

Gazes into Heaven

Sees the Glory of God - & sees

Jesus STANDING at God's Right Hand

& so he tells the Sanhedrin about it
& that **SEALED** his fate

But **before** we **move on** . . .

People ask "Why is Jesus '**standing**',
instead of **sitting** at the Right Hand of God (*like normally described*)

& **I agree** with **those** who believe - that **Jesus** must be **standing**
to **WELCOME** the **first Martyr** of the **NT church**

Jesus is **Interceding** - & **Welcoming** Stephen home
Maybe with the "**Crown of Life**" in His hand

& so **Stephen** has **Great Peace** with **God's Plan**

But **the SANHEDRIN** has now **turned into** - a **LYNCH MOB**

Acts 7:57- (nlt)

57 Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him
58 and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him . . .
(Let's save the rest of V.58 for a minute)

This was a **totally ILLEGAL Act** - According to the **Roman Law** they were **currently** living **under**

But **LOOK** at the **last two statements** Stephen made & **see** if they **remind you** of anybody . . .

Acts 7:59-60 (nlt)

59 As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
60 He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

With **Two Statements** that are almost **IDENTICAL** to **those** made by **Jesus** on the Cross

Stephen **PROVES** - that for Him -
To LIVE is Christ & to DIE is Gain

& **with that** - Stephen **received** his **FINAL CROWN**

James 1:12 (esv)

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Have you MADE an "All-In Commitment"
to remain **STEADFAST** under **TRIAL**

Because we WILL FACE - trials, difficulties, & testings in this life

& We will have the opportunity to either:

Be Focused on SELF - & our SELF Preservation

Be Focused on Bringing Glory to God

both by how we LIVE, & if necessary, by how we DIE

But KNOW THIS - Stephen did not make his decision
to STAND for Christ - at THIS MOMENT

That Decision was Fully Made - a Long, Long Time ago

When Stephen decided that for him

“To Live is Christ, & to Die is Gain”

& God used Stephen Right Here

to start TWO Great FIRES - that are STILL BURNING today

1) It was THIS ACT that began the SPREAD of Christianity
into the Gentile World (we'll see that next week)

& 2) it was THIS ACT that left A Permanent MARK
on a Pharisee named SAUL of Tarsus

You see - Jesus had an Appointment with SAUL
on the Road to Damascus

& THIS EVENT - Set the Stage - for That Appointment

Look back up at the second half of Acts 7:58

***58 . . . His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of
a young man named Saul.***

We'll look at the **ROLE** this event played in **SAUL'S Life** Next Week

But **KNOW For Sure** - Stephen had a **MAJOR IMPACT**
on **the Ministry** of **PAUL the Apostle**

Back in **Acts 1:8** Jesus told His disciples - they **would be**
His **WITNESSES** - when **The Holy Spirit** came upon them

The **GREEK word** for **WITNESS** is **MARTYS**
from which we get our word - **MARTYR**

It means LIT - ***“One who testifies to what they have seen or heard”***

Stephen was the **first MARTYR** of the NT **Church**

He was **willing to Testify** to what he had **seen** and **heard**
& He **HONORED Christ** - Both **in his life**, & **in his death**

I believe **Stephen TAUGHT Paul** by **Example**
what **Paul wrote** in

Philippians 1:20–21 (ESV)

***20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all
ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be
honored in my body, whether by life or by death.***

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Let's Pray