

The First Martyr

Acts 7

Introduction

In August of 2024, an Ethiopian Christian church leader named Kitessa was warned that if he did not stop preaching the gospel that he would be killed. This threat did not stop Kitessa because he kept on preaching. August 25, 2024 Kitessa was gunned down by after coming home from church on a Sunday morning. Kitessa's wife heard the gunfire and, when she could not reach him by phone, ran toward the sound and found him lying on the side of the road. He left behind a wife and five children. Kitessa is just one of thousands and thousands of stories throughout history of men and women who have died in service of Jesus. Religious persecution is rampant in places like Ethiopia and in the middle east. And even under the threat of death, these faithful believers do not stop doing what Jesus has called them to do.

This morning, we are going to read the account of the very first person to die for their faith: Stephen. Like the many others who died for Jesus after him, Stephen lived a life that reflected "He not me". He, and others, understood that it wasn't/isn't about them. If you are physically able, please stand as we read Acts 7:54-60.

Stephen's Sermon (v.1-50)

I won't go verse by verse through all of Stephen's sermon this morning, but I do want to encourage you to go back and read it for yourselves. That being said, I feel that, in order to properly understand why the Sanhedrin were so enraged at Stephen, we do need to look at the verses in a somewhat general sense.

The early church was facing some pretty serious and severe persecution. In the first several chapters of Acts, a lot happens. But, specifically after the events of Pentecost and when the Holy Spirit is given to the believers, things really ramp up. Evangelism and discipleship happen and the church begins to grow. But the same religious leaders who wanted Jesus dead, still want to kill the church. The early church leaders were emboldened by the Spirit and His work in their lives. They were beaten and thrown in prison, but that didn't matter. In Acts 4:19, Peter and John are before the Sanhedrin (the very same one Stephen will be in front of shortly). The Sanhedrin "threatens them from speaking to anyone in that (Jesus) name again." But listen to what Peter and John say in Acts 4:19-20, "Whether it's right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." That's POWERFUL. Remember, that one of those men denied Jesus! Then again in chapter 5:29, after being released from prison, Peter and the other apostles boldly proclaimed, "We must obey God rather than people."

Then we come to chapter 6 and introduced to Stephen. He becomes one of the first deacons at the church in Jerusalem. Stephen is a Godly man who loves the Lord, and when those two things are present in your life and spirit, you will face opposition; and that is what happens with Stephen. Except, he was such a Godly man that they couldn't find anything to accuse him of, so they had to manufacture accusations. You can read what they did in Acts 6:8-15. After these false accusations were made, he is brought before the Sanhedrin and put on trial. And beginning in chapter 7 verse 1, Stephen speaks one of the most powerful and direct sermon's you will read in the book of Acts.

Stephen has to give this defense/preach this sermon because he is being accused of blasphemy. The false claims that the “witnesses” brought forward at the end of chapter 6 deal with the Temple; and God’s presence. So, starting with Abraham and leading all the way up to Solomon, Stephen gives a great history lesson. Ultimately, the problem that the Sanhedrin had with Jesus was His claim that He is God in the flesh, thus nullifying the need for the Temple. God’s desire to dwell with His people goes all the way back to the Garden, and He was doing so there, too, long before Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, or Solomon.

Stephen’s defense is that God isn’t confined to one single place. The history that he covers shows that God appeared to, was with, or resided outside the Temple/Tabernacle. He also reminded them that God spoke with these individuals and not just through certain people. I think there may have been a tendency for the religious leaders to think that they were the only ones who knew the full mind of the Lord. And if we aren’t careful, we might think that God is only in one place and one place only. As we read in Acts 7:48, God doesn’t dwell in sanctuaries made with hands. When Stephen was preaching this and now as believers, God resides within us as believers through His Holy Spirit.

God was with Abraham in Mesopotamia, God was with Joseph in Egypt, he was with Moses as a child, he appeared to Moses in the burning bush; declaring the place he was at was holy ground. Stephen even tells the Sanhedrin, in verse 37, that Moses pointed forward to another prophet; whom we know will be Jesus. Jesus is the greater Moses. He was mighty, a rejected savior, and spoke on behalf of God. He also would lead His people on an exodus from slavery to freedom.

Notice that throughout this text, Stephen stays true to the text that he has, the Old Testament. All of this is rooted in the scriptures. The best interpretation of the Old Testament would be the New Testament. I've said this before, but do not neglect reading the Old Testament in your bible studies because without it, it makes understanding the New Testament more difficult. In fact, I don't think you could properly understand the New Testament without the Old. If Acts 7 was the first chapter of the bible that someone had ever read, they would get a small understanding of what Stephen was talking about, but for those of us who are familiar with the Old Testament, it brings a lot of valuable insight to us.

Before moving on, I want to make one more point about his sermon. If you'll notice, he doesn't ask to step away to prepare anything. He doesn't pull out a bible (although he quotes scripture). He doesn't have any notes. Stephen preaches this sermon because it was engrained in him. He knew his scriptures. He had hidden God's word in his heart. This was real to him. Jesus had changed his life and he was living for Christ and not for himself.

Stephen's Rebuke (v.51-53) (read these verses)

At the end of Stephen's sermon, he absolutely lays into the Sanhedrin. He calls them a "stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears". His entire sermon had led up to this moment. Stephen's goal, I think, was to get them to be aware of their own actions and where they are to be held accountable. I don't think he was just looking to tear into them and tell them all that they were doing wrong. I think ultimately he told them these things because he desired that they repent!

The phrase that Stephen uses is almost exactly what God told Moses about the Israelites in Exodus 33:5, **"⁵ For the Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites: You are a stiff-necked people. If**

I went up with you for a single moment, I would destroy you. Now take off your jewelry, and I will decide what to do with you.” Up until this phrase, the people were probably nodding their

heads in agreement. But Stephen flips the script on them and now tells them that this group is just as stiff necked as the people of Israel were when they were forming a golden calf.

Let me add something here: we do something similar as we sit in church listening to sermons. We nod our heads in agreement and say, “Boy I hope so and so is hearing this.” Or we don’t think that what is said is applicable to us. We think we are ok by our actions when in reality, we need to listen and apply what is being said just as much as someone else. All people are accountable for their own actions, just as we are.

Stephen tells them that they are absolutely no different than the Israelites who built a golden calf or the ones who killed the prophets. They are stiff necked (stubborn) and have uncircumcised hearts and ears. What does he mean by that? Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. It was something that meant they were part of the covenant community. In the Old Testament, when God, or the prophets, referred to someone as uncircumcised, it was meant to tell them that they weren’t part of the community. This phrase was commonly used to describe the pagan nations around Israel. What Stephen is telling them is that their ears and hearts are not hearing or receiving the truth of God’s word. And this is the group of people who prided themselves on being the religious leaders! They were the ones who had a head knowledge of the truth, but their hearts and ears didn’t receive it.

The people in front of Stephen in this moment were no different than the many who killed prophets for foretelling of a coming Messiah. They thought they were different, but they were exactly the same. God’s Spirit was trying to teach them the truth and they were “always resisting

Him” Stephen says. How many people today still resist the Holy Spirit’s calling and direction? How many still resist the Holy Spirit’s message of truth? How many in this room or watching online have been resisting the Holy Spirit’s call to repentance? I’m not just talking about those who have never repented, but those who have done so before.

When you read this sermon, you don’t see much of a defense from Stephen toward the accusations made against him. You almost wonder if he knew what was coming. It is like Stephen knew that if he wanted to save his life, he would have to give up his convictions. So, the way I read this, Stephen uses this as one last opportunity to point the people in front of him toward Jesus. His sermon ended up not being a defense of himself, but a witness for Jesus. In other words, Stephen decreased so Jesus could increase.

Stephen’s Death (v.54-60)

The sudden shift in the narrative here reads as if the Sanhedrin had simply cut him off and took him away. They were incredibly angry at what he had told them. When I read this, it reminded me of how Nebuchadnezzar responded to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego last week. The Sanhedrin were gnashing their teeth at him and this group of educated and “religious” people were so mad that they take him outside to kill him.

This shows that how we respond to God’s word will tell us a lot about where our hearts are at. Nebuchadnezzar, the Sanhedrin, and even others heard the truth of God’s word and they responded with anger, rage, and vitriol. When others hear God’s word, they respond with conviction, humility, and repentance. How do you respond to the truth of God’s word? Do you get angry or convicted? Do you respond in humility or rage? Even now, can you feel your heart

being hardened to what God's word says or is it soft and pliable. It is pretty clear where the religious leaders stand because they are filled with rage.

And God bless Stephen, because in this moment, he looks up to heaven and sees Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. This is a very significant statement because when Jesus is mentioned as being in heaven, it is almost exclusively in a *seated* position. In fact, while He was on trial, Jesus told the Sanhedrin in Luke 22:69, "69 But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." Is Jesus standing here to honor Stephen? Is Jesus standing to welcome Stephen as one might do if someone you love but haven't seen in a while comes home? Was he standing to give witness for Stephen as Stephen was giving witness for Him here? There isn't an exact reason, but I think these are all very valid, and could be all encompassing. Honestly, no matter the reason, the sight of Jesus standing gave Stephen the boldness an assurance to endure the death he was about to experience.

With stones in hand, they drag Stephen out of the city and begin to hurl them at him. What a horrible and terrible way to die. Rock after rock after rock striking him all over his body. And instead of crying out for his life to be spared, Stephen, instead echoes the words of Jesus on the cross. These last words of Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" are POWERFUL words. Stephen wouldn't be able to say those things if he wasn't filled with the Spirit and increasing Jesus. Only the power of Christ can help us forgive our murderers. It is only the power of Christ that help us to endure those moments right before death where we stand firm on our convictions. It is only the power of Jesus that can enable and embolden us to face what Stephen (and many others) did and be ok with it.

Notice that the bible said he “fell asleep”. The bible makes it seem so peaceful. Like a person going to sleep and then waking up! I remember when the girls were babies and they would fall asleep and they would look so peaceful. No worries. No burdens. No cares. Just peace and rest. For the Christian, that is what death is like for us. Even through horrible circumstances like Stephen’s we can still find rest and peace in death. Because like in our life when we wake up to a new day, when we go to sleep in death, we will wake up in eternity and see Jesus as He welcomes us into our heavenly reward.

In the process of this stoning, we see that the people throwing the rocks are laying down their coats at the feet of Saul. This is his first introduction to the bible and Saul is going to become a real factor for the church. Saul is a chief persecutor of the church. He hates Jesus and his followers and sets out to destroy them both. A few short chapters from this in the book of Acts, Saul is going to Damascus and while on the road, is blinded and hears Jesus speak to him. Saul will give his life to Jesus and will be given a new name: Paul.

How can someone go from wanting to kill the church to being its chief missionary? Jesus. And Stephen’s stoning is going to play a major role in Paul’s life, I think. I believe that this even impacted him more than he ever thought it would. There are at least two references to Stephen in Paul’s later ministry. One is in Acts 17:24, where Paul is preaching in Athens and mentions the unknown god. He says, “The God who made the whole world and everything in it-He is Lord of heaven and earth-does not live in shrines made by hands.” Didn’t Stephen say this same thing in Acts 7? And in Acts 22:20, Paul mentions Stephen by name and his resulting death. Our witness travels a long distance. Our actions and our words have to match up. When we live for Him instead of ourselves, we have the potential to impact lives in ways we might never fathom. We

may never see the impact that our lives have on other people, but our witness in the moments when life is hard, can show a lot of people how much we love the Lord. And when others see how much Jesus truly means to us, it can play a role in changing their lives.

Conclusion

Stephen wasn't trained to preach. Stephen wasn't a seminary graduate. Stephen wasn't a preacher. He didn't have a podcast or a book deal. But what Stephen did have is the Holy Spirit living inside of him. And it is through that empowering and indwelling of God's Holy Spirit that enabled Stephen to stand and deliver one of the strongest sermons you will read. Can I offer you some encouragement this morning? Please don't think you are "ill-equipped" to do something of significance for the Kingdom. Please don't think you cannot be used by the Lord simply because you haven't gone to seminary or you're not a Pastor or religious leader. There are many people who do great things for the LORD who aren't/weren't those things either. There are many people who do amazing things for the Lord that no one will ever hear about. They all have at least two things in common: 1. They are living a "He not Me" life. And 2. They are indwelt with the same Spirit that indwelt Stephen and gave him the boldness to preach.

With that in mind, let me ask you also, not to refer to yourself as "just a church member". What I mean is saying, "Well, I can't do that...I'm just a church member. I'm not trained, etc...". I think that is a tactic of the enemy to keep you from tapping into the difference you can make for God's Kingdom. It is Satan's way to discourage you. When you read about the last day of Stephen's life, I don't think there is a person in here who would say that he was, "just a member of the church of Jerusalem." So, in the spirit of that, please don't sell yourself short of the potential you have to be used by the Lord. People outside this building or your family or outside

this town may ever know you, but that's ok. Because it isn't about us, is it? God, through His Spirit, will enable and equip you. And when you pursue Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, we can do what He's called us to do and that is to partner together in the work of the ministry.

As our musicians come forward, let me also challenge you to continue increasing Jesus in your life, maintaining an attitude of "its not about me". Stephen lived that kind of attitude! He knew his life wasn't about him and he ended up giving his life in service of Jesus. Our lives are not about us. If you are here this morning and you have never given your life to Jesus and want to live with a purpose greater than yourself, come see me in a few moments. I want to pray with you. Or if you're here and feel the Lord leading you to repent in another area of your life, do so as well. Ask God's Spirit to fill you. Ask Him to revive your heart. Ask Him to give you the boldness that is needed in life. Lay down your preferences and desires in service to Him. It's about Jesus; not us. Would you stand as we pray?