

A Grain of Wheat

“The Spiritual Significance of Martyrdom”

Acts 6 NIV

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. **10** But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. **14** For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

- The Story of Stephen is one that is remarkable as he will forever be remembered as the first Martyr for Jesus.
- I can’t help but reflect on this biblical account in light of the recent event of our brother in Christ, Charlie Kirk being martyred. My heart remains stirred.
- Charlie demonstrated a genuine faith and love for the Lord Jesus. Charlie Kirk said when asked what he would want to be remembered

for, “I want to be remembered for courage for my faith ... the most important thing is my faith in my life.”

- I can only wish I had been given the opportunity to meet him here on earth, but I am convinced that for every believer we will be united with him in eternity one day. Because of Christ, Charlie is not dead but very much alive and in the presence of the Lord
- Charlie is special for many reasons. One being he is the first well known believer in this generation to loose his life for righteousness sake and the declaration of the Gospel.
- There is a shock wave around our country and even the world at this tragic event. We are witnessing how God has already begun to use his death for the good. **Romans 8:28** says that “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.”
- There are some things God simply will not allow to be forgotten or go to waist. The blood of the martyrs is one we see throughout scripture and history as having great effect for the Kingdom of God.
- The early Christian writer Tertullian said, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"

Vs 8

Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

- The story of Stephen is important and stands out to me in a special way, like Charlie, Stephen was not considered an Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor or Teacher. Stephen was simply “a man full of God’s grace and power.”
- God used Stephen because he was full of faith and power. As a result Stephen “performed great wonders and signs among the people.”

Vs. 9,10

Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

- Stephen debated with these Jews under the Empowerment of the Holy Spirit, he showed greater wisdom than his opponents
- There is no indication that Stephen – in his own ability – was smarter, better educated, or a better debater than these Jews. It was the wisdom of the Spirit. We should attribute his upper hand in the debate to the Spirit by which he spoke.

Vs. 11

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

- As for Stephen, because they could not outwit him in public debate they resorted to secretly persuading.
- Because they couldn't win the debate with Stephen they resorted to fabricated lies and false claims about him to justify their intentions to put him to death.
- This remains a sure sign of how the Devil works and continues to work today.

John 8:44

44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

- But there was something about Stephen that is noted in scripture that everyone noticed and could not explain.

Vs. 15

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Two thoughts here:

1. Stephen was on trial before the highest religious court he could face; examined by honored, educated, and powerful men. This same court turned on him and that day a great injustice took place.
 - In light of this, how grateful should we be when Godly men and women are appointed in places of authority in the civil system. If that had been the case here, Stephen's life could have been saved.
2. *"Stephen's face did not have that mild, soft, angelic look that we see in so many paintings; nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God."* **Guzik**
 - The face of an angel also means that Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God's hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people.

Acts 7

Stephen before the Sanhedrin preached pretty much the whole OT from Abraham to Jesus in Verse 1 to 50. He is proving that scripture has pointed to Jesus from the beginning and they have failed to see the signs God has given leading to Jesus.

Vs. 51-53 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! **52** Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — **53** you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Vs. 54-60

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. **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. **56** “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, **58** dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” **60** Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

- Stephen is recorded as the first Martyr of the Church. He was the first one to lay down his life for the testimony of Jesus.
- You have to know that in the heart of the Lord this was a very important moment. One that obviously gained the attention of Heaven.
- As I mentioned earlier with the recent event of our brother in Christ, Charlie Kirk being martyred, my heart is stirred.

- We have experienced something rare and unusual as a result. I would dare to say it's more than empathy though empathy plays a part. I would dare to say that what is happening in the hearts of people is more than publicity and social media though the whole world was able to witness this horrific event.
- Scripture says that at the time when Stephen was being martyred

Vs. 55, 56

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.

56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

I want you to notice what Stephen experienced:

1. He looked up and saw the Glory of God.
 2. He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
 3. Stephen said, "I see heaven open..."
- There are not many things that get God's attention like this...
 - Stephen boldly professing Jesus before this crowd, to the point where it cost his life was something that not only caught God's attention but 1. brought the Glory of God 2. Caused Jesus to stand in attention 3. and caused the Heavens to open...
 - I believe what we are experiencing as a result of Charlie's Martyrdom is an open Heaven, a sense of God's presence, and Jesus himself revealing himself to people in honor of Charlie's witness.

John 6:33

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."

- Is it possible, that right now what people are experiencing is the drawing of the Holy Spirit because like with Stephen; God himself is near, the heavens are open and Jesus is being revealed?
- It sure seems the Father is drawing the hearts of people in a remarkable way.
- From his death we are witnessing something that doesn't make sense to the human brain. Life is springing up.

John 12 NIV

23 Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24** Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. **25** Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26** Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

- Jesus here is speaks of laying down his life for us. That unless he lays down his life it remains only a single seed. But if he lays it down like a grain of wheat in the ground it will produce many seeds.
- The principle remains for those who have layed down their lives for the sake of Christ, both in the Bible and in History. When this happens, one simple subtraction leads to the multiplication of many others.

In the 1950's there was a group of young Christian missionaries who had a heart to reach the Auca indians in Ecuador. Their names were Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian.

This particular indigenous group was known to be very violent and the group was warned about them. The Auca indians lived very remote

and could only be reached by boat or plane. Jim Elliot and the group out of deep burden for these people to know the Gospel would fly over and drop gifts to the Waorani or Auca Indians that seemed to be well received. After several months of this the five missionaries landed on a sand bar were on January 8, 1956 they were met by the Auca Indians and were tragically killed.

When this happened some of the warrior Indians reported seeing lights in the sky which they later say were angels and they heard singing which they understood later to be angels rejoicing at the faith of these missionaries. The result of these five missionaries being martyred and the witness of Heaven over their death was the Gospel was later brought in and many in the tribe were saved and gave their lives to Jesus. The story of these 5 missionaries is documented in the movie "The End of the Spear"

- The result of Stephen being martyred was the Church spread out under the threat of persecution. This caused the Church to multiply and grow in every direction.
- Not only did the Gospel spread to new territories and even Gentile regions. But one of the noted witnesses who approved of Stephen's killing was Saul. Saul only two chapters later encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus and is radically converted into a follower of Jesus. Saul's name is changed to Paul and he becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles. He is responsible for writing the majority of the New Testament that we read from today.
- So watch out for those who persecute the Gospel today, they may become some of the greatest preachers the world has ever seen.
- Because God is wise and able he will take what the Devil meant for evil, and will turn it and use it for good.

Revelation 12 NKJV

9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.

11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

Closing:

How about You?

1. Is the Father drawing you to Jesus?

Do you sense that God is doing something in your heart?

Is he revealing himself to you and drawing you to himself?

2. Is God positioning you to tell others about Him?

Are you around people who are asking questions about God?

Are you willing to tell people about what God has done in your life?