

Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 7

ILLUSTRATION: When **Nicholas Copernicus** published his model of **heliocentrism** in 1543 it turned the world upside down. The popular geo-centric model was now obsolete. But the theory in itself, while revolutionary was not as important as the **implications** it held. Heliocentrism held implications for:

- Gravity
- The Calendar
- The orbit of the planets
- The axis of the Earth

In one declaration he turned the world as we knew it upside down, or better yet right side up.

ILLUSTRATION: As a child I went through a similar paradigm shift in my search to discover the truth about **jolly old Saint Nick**. It was around the 2nd grade, I had heard rumors, but didn't know for sure if they could be trusted so I decided to discover the truth for myself.

If it's true - that Santa is always watching then goodness pays major dividends! Besides I had really good Christmas's, I always got a lot more toys than my cousin's down the road. I was an only child, they were 5 kids. But that didn't matter to Santa, I figured the only reason I got more than they did - was **I was just a better kid**. Simple as that.

It all began at the mall. You know that Santa hangs out at the mall just before Christmas. It was always weird the year he also was at Walmart, but there were explanations for that - magic reindeer and all.

I remember planning everything out - I'd go to the mall and tell Santa that all I wanted for Christmas was **He-man** toys. Then I'd tell my parents all I wanted was **G.I. Joe** toys.

Finally Christmas day came and under the tree was all _____. Well I won't spoil it for you.

But that realization changed everything for me. You see up till that point I thought that my cousins were really bad kids. I didn't know what it was but they must be really naughty because they didn't get nears as much cool stuff as I did.

POINT - Well when you discover a truth at first it's just an insight, but if you allow it to come full circle, you will discover that it has broader implications for you life.

Such was the case with this young man Stephan. He was the man who discovered that

Revelation from God holds Redirection for Man.

CONTEXT:

The Early Church's beginning in many ways parallels the launching of Christ's earthly ministry - in that it began with much favor and popular approval but with time public opinion turned.

- The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of **Pentecost** gave the Jerusalem Church some 120 strong an incredible boost with the addition of 3000 new members. It was an overnight mega-church. One of the key doctrines of this new movement was the **resurrection** of Christ. This teaching set them at odds with the **Sadducees** (who believed in no resurrection).

Peter and John were arrested in Acts 4, but responded with great boldness, and the church continued to progress as well as grow in it's popular appeal.

- **Acts 2:47** tells us they were⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.
- In **Acts 4:33** tells us that... abundant grace was upon them all.
- **Acts 4:4** reports that the Church had grown to 5000.⁴ But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.
- **Acts 5:13** tells us that, "the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number"
- By **Acts 6:7** The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Not a bad time to be connected to Christianity. But there was a problem - It seems at this point the Church was beginning to drift toward **sync-retism**.

- Many believers were still taking part in temple worship.

- The Church leaders still submitted to the discipline of the synagogues. (Paul 39 lashes)

This was partially in order to remain at least loosely connected with the Jewish community for the sake of Evangelism, and partially because the implications of this new teaching had not fully be realized. Perhaps Christianity was to be understood as a branch of Judaism, a sect within the larger Jewish community.

ENTER STEPHEN - That all changed as a young man named Stephen began to teach. **DEACON** - Stephen was one of the first deacons selected to serve the Jerusalem Church. But his being a deacon did not stop him from being an incredible evangelist.

ILLUSTRATION: Throughout the history of the Church God has raised up some men to champion causes, others to develop them. This was true during the protestant reformation. **Martin Luther** reclaimed the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but he did not fully develop all of its implications for worship within the greater church. While Luther was a great preacher of the Gospel, **Philip Melanchthon** had the mind to develop theology and explain all of its implications.

This same comparison can be made between Simon **Peter** and **Stephen**. Peter was the great herald of the truth, but Stephen was able to recognize the ways that the Gospel affected life as they knew it.

The unique aspect of Stephens preaching was that he recognized that if everything we believe about Christ was true, then **temple worship was obsolete.**

You see JESUS was everything the Temple had been pointing to.

- **Incarnation** - The Jewish temple was the earthly embodiment of the revelation of God to humanity. It was there that the Shakinah glory dwelt. It was the closest thing to incarnation the Jews had ever seen, until Jesus.

In Christ the fullest of the Godhead dwelt in bodily form. He was everything the temple had pointed to.

- **Atonement** - The temple was a place of sacrifice and atonement for sins. Until Christ, when his blood paid the ultimate price for man's sin.
- **Mediation** - The temple was the place where an earthly priest went before God on our behalf, begging a parden for our sins - until Christ where He as the GREAT HIGH PRIEST entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled his own blood on the mercy seat silencing the demands of the law crying out against us.

Apparently Stephen had preached to the Jewish people that they no longer needed the shadow, the substance had arrived! **TEMPLE WORSHIP WAS OBSOLETE.**

It was akin to cassette tapes, or bag phones - something much better has arrived.

His preaching carried such logical appeal that, “they were unable to cope with the Spirit with which he was speaking (Acts 6:12)”.

As a result he was brought before the Sanhedrin, a Jewish legal body.

Acts 6:13–7:53 (NASB95)

¹³ They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.

SERMON - Stephen begins an incredible sermon as he highlights how God has always been bigger than one place -

- God was with Abraham in Mesopotamia - Acts 7:2
- God was with the Fathers in Egypt - Acts 7:6
- God was with Moses in the wilderness - Acts 7:19
- God was with Joshua as he came into the land of promise - Acts 7:45
- God was with David and Solomon as they built the Temple - Acts 7:46

What was the conclusion? God was not limited to a single place, and we did not have to be limited to worship in the Temple. In quoting **Isaiah** Stephen said, ⁴⁸ “However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: ⁴⁹ ‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is the footstool of My feet; What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord, ‘Or what place is there for My repose? ⁵⁰ ‘Was it not My hand which made all these things?’

Then he began to indict the crowd, putting them on trial before God for their unbelief.

⁵¹ “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵² “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

ILLUSTRATION: I heard a man this week who was a self-proclaimed America's rabbi and he said - I am so sick and tired of people who have negative messages - we need positive encouragements - **friend when we are dying and going to hell, it's not easy to put a positive spin on that - WE NEED TRUTH, WE NEED THE GOSPEL. Stephen gave them the truth.**

They responded with incredible anger - Acts 7:54–60 (NASB95)

⁵⁴ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they *began* gnashing their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; ⁵⁶ and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸ When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and the witnesses **laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

There is our great Apostle... prior to his conversion witnessing the stoning of Stephen.

Theologians tell us that the fact that the people laid their garments at Saul’s feet is significant in that it leads us to think that **Saul may have instigated the entire martyrdom of Stephen.**

We see this is in keeping with what we know of Saul’s persecution of the Church. According to **Acts 8:3** ³ But Saul *began ravaging* the church...

One can’t help but wonder what went through the mind of Saul as he heard the words of Stephen - ⁵⁹ They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

I am preaching this story because I believe that this experience was **second only to the Damascus road** in making an impression on young Saul of Tarsus.

This was the first time that we know Saul clearly **heard and saw** the Gospel. He **heard it in Stephen defense** and he **saw it in Stephen’s calling for their forgiveness** in the midst of his death.

You see the **goal of Stephen’s life was seeing men and women made right with God** - He didn’t want some sin against him to stand in the way of his life’s mission. BTW, can you do that, are you so driven by the Gospel, so passionate about seeing others brought to peace with Christ that you REFUSE To allow personal offenses to stand in the way of that goal?

SAUL’S Response? He Acts 8:1 (NASB95)

¹ Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

You see this was the first christian to die for his faith and there have been BILLIONS since. Currently, **An average of 171,000 Christians worldwide are martyred** for their faith per year. [Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary \(2006\)](#)

That's over 1 million per decade.

Saul opened that door - do you see why he considered himself the chief of sinners? He quite possibly was the primary agent in opening the door to the death of Billions of the Lord's people.

But let me tell you - you can't read of Christian martyrs and you surly can't witness a christian dying for his or her faith without it **RADICALLY Affecting you.**

- It is interesting to consider that just a few years later Saul would return to this same city as one who worshipped the same Jesus whom Stephen preached.
- Saul would one day look Stephen's widow in the eye.
- He would one day preach to Stephen's orphaned children.

Behold what grace was bestowed as God answered Stephen's final prayer - "do not hold this sin against them!".

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