



First Baptist Church Selmer

SALT & LIGHT • "HAVE SOME GUTS!" • ACTS 6:8-15, 7:51-53, 7:54-60 • 10/24/2021

MAIN POINT

Even in the most perilous of times, we are commanded to walk in faith and obedience, not in fear.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What story of martyrdom, either ancient or modern, has been most inspirational to you?

What qualities do you think make someone willing to be a martyr?

We may not encounter religious persecution in our daily lives, but it is a harsh reality in our world. In one-third of the world, persecution is on the rise, and for many this includes martyrdom. Through the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, we'll examine an early account of the suffering Jesus guaranteed His followers would face, and we'll learn some valuable truths from the example of boldness Stephen set for us.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 6:8-15.

What attributes of Stephen are evident in these verses?

What do you consider the decisive factor in Stephen's ability to best his opponents in this discussion /debate (v. 10)? What implication does this have for us?

Wisdom, faith, grace, power, and the Spirit's presence marked Stephen as an exceptional Christian who was well equipped for his role. Because of God's favor and power, Stephen consistently performed great wonders and signs among the people. To this point, only the apostles had performed such deeds. The term "wonders" refers to miracles that drew observers' awe and amazement. Signs were miracles that gave evidence of God's presence and activity and conveyed spiritual truths. God was working through Stephen in unusual and powerful ways, but the synagogue's members tried to refute the gospel Stephen proclaimed.

What were the charges brought against Stephen?

Explain the false witnesses' contemptuous reference to Jesus and their charge against Him.

What do you think the Sanhedrin members saw in Stephen's face that evoked a comparison with an angel's face (v. 15)?

Stephen's courage and fearlessness in standing by his Christian convictions aroused intense hostility. Unable to best him in debate, members of the Freedman's Synagogue induced men to charge Stephen falsely. The false accusers stirred up three groups: the people in general; the elders, who were respected leaders and represented the Sadducees; and the scribes, most of whom were Pharisees. The group took Stephen to the Sanhedrin, the Jews' high court.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 7:51-53.

What did Stephen specifically charge the religious leaders with doing?

Why do you think he bluntly leveled serious charges against them? What did he want to accomplish?

Stephen boldly took the offensive, describing his opponents as stubborn and rejecting the Spirit's leading. The religious leaders followed their ancestors' example by murdering Jesus, and they failed to keep the law they professed to revere. Stephen declared that God never had limited Himself to one land or to a particular place, such as the temple. He well may have been the first Christian to grasp clearly God's intention that Gentiles, as well as Jews, receive the good news of salvation in Christ.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 7:54-60.

How would you paraphrase the religious leaders' response in verse 54?

How is the Spirit's presence emphasized?

What do you think was the purpose of Stephen's vision?

What parallels are evident between Jesus' death and Stephen's death?

Enraged in general by Stephen's sermon and in particular by his charge that they had received but had not kept the law, the Sanhedrin members stoned Stephen, who responded by kneeling down in an attitude of prayer and worship of his Lord. After he had prayed, he died. The phrase fell asleep is a softer expression for dying. It also expresses the Christians' assurance of resurrection. Stephen died with a vision of His exalted Lord in his mind and immediately stepped into His presence.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Do you have difficulty being bold? Why?

How do we balance boldness with humility?

Do you think hostility to Christian beliefs and values is increasing in our society? Why?

What forms is such hostility taking? How should we respond?

What factors sometimes prevent you from seizing opportunities to express your beliefs and values? What can you do this week to seize the opportunities in your life?

PRAYER

Close with a prayer of encouragement for your group, challenging them to pursue boldness this week. Thank God for the examples of Stephen and others who show us how to live with zeal for the gospel.

COMMENTARY

| ACTS 6:8-15

6:8 A mark of the authenticity of Stephen's work is that it was distinguished by great wonders and signs. God often affirmed the apostolic message in this way (5:12). The term grace may refer to his spiritual attractiveness or charm. More likely, it conveys the sense of God's favor. The Greek term translated power gives us our word dynamite.

6:9-10 Though Jews from several different backgrounds disputed with Stephen, he swept them aside by use of his human intellectual gifts (wisdom) and divine empowerment (the Spirit).

6:11 Stephen's supposedly blasphemous words on this occasion were probably similar to his speech in Ac 7, which emphasized Israel's disobedience and the fulfillment of the OT in the ministry of Jesus, including His replacing the temple and the law. This would have aroused resentment among those who revered Moses and rejected Jesus as Messiah.

6:12 Like the apostles before him, especially Peter and John, Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin after those from the synagogues were unable to stand against him. The confrontation now elevated from informal dispute to a more formal legal interrogation.

6:13 The fact that Stephen had not actually spoken blasphemous words is confirmed by the fact that false witnesses were produced to sustain the charges against him.

6:14 The charge against Stephen was similar to the charges against Jesus—that He would destroy the temple. They were also concerned about preserving their customs or oral laws, which they believed they had inherited from Moses.

6:15 This statement is reminiscent of Moses' shining face as he descended Mount Sinai after receiving the Commandments and Jesus' radiance on the mount of transfiguration. Stephen's face reflected something of God's glory, a result of the Holy Spirit's presence and empowerment.

| ACTS 7:51-60

7:51-52 The descriptors Stephen used to condemn Israel for unbelief and disobedience (stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears) were commonly used by OT prophets (Lv 26:41; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:26; Ezek 44:7,9). This language was also adopted by Paul (Rm 2; Gal 5) where he said unbelieving Jews relied on outward signs rather than transformed hearts. Possibly Paul was influenced by Stephen's speech since he was present (Ac 7:58; 8:1), but the OT was the more obvious influence. Stephen's words would either raise the ire of his audience or break their hearts, leading to repentance. The OT prophets had delivered messages similar to his own, and your fathers, Stephen said, persecuted and killed them. Worse, his audience had made themselves the betrayers and murderers of the Righteous One whom God promised through the prophets.

7:53 Even though the OT does not explicitly state that the law was given by angels, Stephen, Paul (Gal 3:19), and the author of Hebrews (Heb 2:2) stated that angels were involved in the

process of lawgiving. This likely implied that the law was especially important since God entrusted its deliverance to angels.

7:54 Stephen's audience expressed displeasure both inwardly (enraged in their hearts) and outwardly (gnashed their teeth at him). They took themselves to be Israel's religious leaders, pious men of God, and yet Stephen charged them with deep spiritual corruption.

7:55 Stephen was a stark contrast to his audience. They were fuming with rage, but he was filled with the Holy Spirit and gazed peacefully into heaven even as he knew death was coming.

7:56-57 "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite self-designation. Each use of this expression in the NT came from the lips of Jesus, except where people quoted His words back to Him (Jn 12:34) and in this verse. Jesus' enthronement beside God in heaven implies His divine status and equality with God the Father, which is why the members of the Sanhedrin became enraged.

7:58 The Romans allowed the Jewish leaders to maintain the sanctity of the temple area, but not carry out the death penalty. That is why Jesus was taken to Pilate, a Roman official, for trial. In this instance, however, Stephen was killed illegally by an enraged mob. This is the first reference in Scripture to Saul (later called Paul). It is disputed whether he was a member of the Sanhedrin or just a young rabbinic student who was zealous for traditional Jewish faith. Whether he was formally involved in the Sanhedrin or not, he "agreed" with the decision to stone Stephen (8:1).

7:59-60 Both of Stephen's requests are remarkable. His first, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!, proclaims that Jesus is Judge and Savior. Stephen's second request, that God not charge his executioners with sin in this matter, illustrates the non vindictive spirit of one who understands that his own sins have been forgiven by grace. Fell asleep is a common expression for death in the Bible (Jn 11:11; 1Co 11:30).