

Stephen: The First Martyr

Various Passages

9/27/2025

Announcements

Hands of Grace Coat Drive all throughout October in honor of Debbie Huntsman We will be accepting donations of new and gently worn coats, hats, scarves, and gloves each and every Sunday during the month of October. Please make sure coats are clean with no stains, have all their buttons and/or working zippers. Communion Bread is gluten-free. Pray over the Honduras Team, Pastor Josh and his family, and the Message.

Introduction

Open up Acts 6 This morning, we will be doing what is known as a Character Study. A bible study method that involves taking a specific character found in the bible with the intention to learn how God molds his children and how they respond to Him. Within character studies, we learn who we are and how we are to live by both making observations and imitating the positive characteristics they display, as well as avoiding the failures and negative characteristics of those who did not pay careful attention to God's word. One thing that is true about Character studies is that it is revealed to us fairly quickly how much we can relate to the individuals found in the pages of scripture. This morning, our character study will be on Stephen, the first Martyr.

But let me preface why I have decided to go this direction this morning...

Illustration

Like many of you, I have been internally processing for the last 2 ½ weeks the martyrdom of Charlie Kirk. Many thoughts and emotions have run through me, including sorrow and grief for the loss of a brother in Christ, as well as anger against the sinfulness of mankind. In the effort to process through the Holy Spirit, why I have felt the way I have these past 18 days, I have asked, "Why"? Why did Charlie die? Particularly, why did he die in this manner? Why have I felt such grief for someone I did not have a close personal relationship with? I have thought, maybe the answer was in the fact that he was only 3 years older than me with two precious babies and a wonderful wife, just as I have. Maybe it was because I had a couple of opportunities to meet Charlie in person. But I have come to discover that the answer to the why is quite simple and yet profound. It was not only that he was a sincere fellow brother in Christ. But his life testified to the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. I can personally attest to this from my own personal interactions with him. But don't take my word for it, go and watch his memorial service that took place last weekend. A truly remarkable and unforgettable event, that is arguably the most spiritually significant event yet in our lifetime. 4 hours of worship that took place before the service even started. The gospel was explicitly preached multiple times, as well as several explicit references to Charlie's God, Jesus Christ. To the incredible moment of Erika Kirk forgiving the young man who murdered her husband just 11 days prior. All while millions of people (over 22 million online), both in person and online, tune in to hear the glorious gospel clearly and boldly proclaimed. (Not a multi-faith event, but a clear, Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father event.) It matters not what you think about Charlie Kirk. The truth of the matter is that the Gospel was preached and God was glorified. In fact, we have seen countless remarks online from people saying things like: "I was an atheist all my life, and a very miserable one. Charlie changed that." "Never been a practising Christian. But after what happened to Charlie, I will be going to church for the first time." "I am a Chinese immigrant, never read a bible or stepped into a church until today." The comments go on and on... In fact, if you are here today and have either recently come to church for the first time in your life to check out what this Jesus thing is all about, or if you have not come to church in a while, I want to say that we are thrilled you are here. In a bit, you will have an opportunity to respond to the God who loves you.

In my time of processing, Stephen has been continually coming to my mind. Not only due to some similarities we find between him and Charlie.

But particularly his witness for Jesus Christ, and the impact that it made on the world.

We will learn from Stephen's life and example through the short, yet positive record of him in the book of Acts, on what it means to live and die for that which matters most, namely, Jesus Christ.

Let us now consider Stephen in the 3 stages of his life as a believer.

Stephen the Deacon Stephen the Preacher Stephen the Martyr

Main Point

Point 1

Scripture

Acts 6:1-7 (NKJV) [1] Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. [2] Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. [3] Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; [4] but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." [5] And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, [6] whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. [7] Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Context

As we know at this point in the book of Acts, the church is in its infant stages and is rapidly increasing in the number of disciples of Jesus. (More people, more problems).

One of these issues that comes up in the early church, there in Jerusalem, is regarding the neglect of the Greek widows in the daily distribution.

The Hellenists (Diaspora) and the Hebrews "The daily distribution" = The care for widows was an important part of Jewish life and normally, the temple authorities would organize the distribution of resources to the needy. However, a conflict is brought to the apostles. The Hellenist saw that their widows were being neglected.

And so to resolve this conflict, the apostles in wisdom asked the church to pick out from among themselves men who could help remedy this widow neglect.

But there were some conditions; these men that the church would select must have been:

Of good reputation
Full of the Holy Spirit
And wise (Ability to apply the knowledge of God to their every day lives)

They were not to look for men who outwardly had some appealing feature. But rather were those who were both spiritually minded, as well as practically minded.

They had to be men whom the church would be confident in selecting as those who would meet the practical needs of the church body. For these men would “serve tables”, which simply speaks of handling the practical administration of the financial and practical details relevant to caring for the widows.

“The deacons were elected to oversee the distribution of monies and provisions to the needy among the fellowship.” (Ogilvie)

And so, 7 men were selected by the church and appointed by the apostles to meet the church’s daily practical needs, among the 7 was a man named Stephen, whom Luke highlights by telling his readers that he was “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”.

Side note: All 7 men had Greek names, implying that they were Hellenists themselves. The church body, as well as its leaders, showed wisdom and sensitivity to the offended Hellenists in an effort to unify the church.

As a result of these Deacons being chosen, we’re told in v. 7 that the word of God spread and the number of disciples multiplied greatly there in Jerusalem, even so that many Jewish priests became obedient to the faith and were saved!

What does this show us about Stephen?

Although the word Deacon is not found here or in the book of Acts, it is largely agreed upon that this was the institution of the role of Deacon in the church.

Scripture

1 Timothy 3:8-12 (ESV) [8] Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. [9] They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. [10] And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. [11] Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. [12] Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

The word deacon simply means “Servant”.

Stephen would be tasked as a servant with meeting the practical needs of the church. Practical service was in fact spiritual service.

He was full of the Holy Spirit, meaning he submitted to God and His formative and empowering work in his life.

Application

When I think about our church today, like the early church, there will always be needs that come up that can be met practically. Although Pastors/Elders are meant to be servants as well, we cannot do everything! You do not have to be a super Christian to meet the needs of the church. But you do have to be submitted to the Holy Spirit and His work in your life. The men and women our Lord sends out on His endeavors are ordinary human people, but people who are motivated by their devotion to Him, which has been brought about through the work of the Holy Spirit. - Oswald Chambers It is a privilege to serve the Lord in practical ways. In fact, Jesus Himself gave us the example of being a servant. After washing His disciples' feet, Jesus said, "15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ... 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" - John 13:15, 17 Today, maybe you would begin to ask God what He is calling you to do to serve the family of God. How can you meet some of the practical needs of the church? We have all been given spiritual gifts by God to be used for the edification of the church. Don't just be a consumer, be a contributor. Serve Jesus faithfully as Stephen's example speaks of. I take comfort knowing that Stephen was just an ordinary guy who was filled with the Spirit of God.

Scripture

1 Timothy 3:13 (NKJV) [13] For those who have served well as deacons, obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Main Point

Point 2

Stephen the Preacher

Scripture

Acts 6:8-15 (NKJV) [8] And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. [9] Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. [10] And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. [11] Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." [12] And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. [13] They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; [14] for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." [15] And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Stephen went from meeting the practical needs of the church to performing signs and wonders among the people. Of course, signs and wonders were always accompanied by the gospel message. For it was the signs and wonders that validated the gospel message.

We're told that some Jews began to dispute with Stephen. The word means to argue, debate. We're not told exactly about what, but it is safe to say it involved Jesus Christ's Messiahship.

But they were unable to resist/oppose his wisdom and the Holy Spirit by which he spoke.

They could not oppose the wisdom and power that was displayed through him. Why? Because they were trying to oppose God the Holy Spirit!

Application

Stephen was given the advantage. But it is all attributed to the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit indwells us and supplies us with the very wisdom from His word that we need to answer the unbelieving world's objections about Christ. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, - 1 Corinthians 1:26-28

Of course, when these Jews could not withstand Stephen, they resorted to the only thing they could do to silence him. They schemed behind the scenes by inducing men to bring false accusations against him.

By doing this, the people began to be stirred up against Stephen, so much so that he is captured and brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, to give an explanation for these accusations.

They even set up false witnesses against him, accusing him, significantly of the same things Jesus was accused of. Blasphemy.

Stephen no doubt would have repeated the same truths Jesus taught.

That Jesus was greater than Moses. That Jesus was God. That Jesus is greater than the temple. That Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. Simply, Jesus is greater.

Stephen's words were twisted by these false witnesses, as it was with Jesus.

APP: It is always a good thing to be accused of the same things Jesus was accused of. May we seek to never let legitimate accusations be made against us that would bring shame to Christ.

But remember, Stephen was of good reputation. He was a man above reproach. Meaning, he lived in such a way that no one could bring a valid accusation against him.

In fact we see this in v.15.

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ac 6:15.

Now sitting before a council of powerful men, Stephen, being full of faith, had a perfect peace and confidence shown in his countenance. Stephen had nothing to fear because he knew and trusted God.

Ch. 7 begins with the question, “Are these things so?” breaking the silence.

Now, we do not have time to cover ch. 7 in its entirety. However, Stephen is now given the floor, an opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the Christ. And let me tell ya, he does not hold back.

In this masterful speech, Stephen pleads with his fellow Jews to earnestly consider Jesus as the true Messiah. He makes his case there in the courtroom by giving an overview of Jewish history and law to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, and has ushered in Himself the New Covenant of Grace.

At the conclusion of his speech, he calls the council to repentance.

51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ac 7:51–53.

“Whoa, Stephen, that’s a little harsh, don’t you think, pal?”

Application

Two characteristics of Stephen I would like us to consider. **Boldness / Courage** The Holy Spirit supplied the boldness. “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” - 2 Timothy 1:7 The righteous are bold as a lion. - Proverbs 28:1 We, too, can be supplied with the boldness we need to preach the gospel with clarity and power. The Holy Spirit’s Instruction “When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” - Luke 12:11-12 Stephen did not shy away from telling the truth of the gospel. He knew full well it could cost him his life. We, too, by faith, must rely on the Holy Spirit to give us courage and instruction on what to say when we are given an opportunity to share our faith with unbelievers. What do I say? Just tell them what God has done in your life!

Thus far, we have learned from Stephen’s example as a Deacon as well as a preacher. Now, we will see his example as a Martyr for the faith.

Main Point

Point 3

Stephen the Martyr

Scripture

Acts 7:54-60 (NKJV) [54] When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. [55] But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, [56] and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" [57] Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; [58] and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. [59] And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen faithfully preached the gospel, and as a result, the Holy Spirit brought conviction upon the hearts of his listeners.

Quote

— Charles Spurgeon

i. "He takes the sharp knife of the Word and rips up the sins of the people, laying open the inward parts of their hearts, and the secrets of their soul...He could not have delivered that searching address with greater fearlessness had he been assured that they would thank him for the operation; the fact that his death was certain had no other effect upon him than to make him yet more zealous."

What is their response? Instead of choosing humility by acknowledging their sin. They chose anger and rage. (Grinding their teeth) They once again could not refute Stephen's truth claims.

Just imagine for a moment the room...

These men, who are held in high honor by the people, highly respected, are now filled with rage.

Meanwhile, Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, is at peace. Having all confidence in His Lord.

He fixes his eyes upward and there sees the glory of God and Jesus, standing at the right hand of God.

"Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

The only place where this title is used by any other person besides Jesus.

We're not exactly sure why Jesus is seen standing; however, we can suppose that Jesus is standing there ready to receive his disciple.

Quote

— *F.F. Bruce*

"Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."

Stephen's last statement at this council is the final straw.

They rush him in rage with one mind and purpose. It's time for him to die.

They could restrain their rage no longer. Contrary to Roman law and order, they took Stephen, and without awaiting sentence against him, amid an uproar, proceeded to stone him, the punishment prescribed in Mosaic Law for a blasphemer.

They in fact were fulfilling what Jesus had said before.

Scripture

John 16:2-3 (ESV) [2] "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. [3] And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me."

And as Stephen is dying, the last words to leave his lips are synonymous with his Lord's final words.

"Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge".

It can be said this way,

"Stephen died as he had lived, a faithful witness to his Master".

Was this a tragedy? A man removed from the earth in seemingly the prime of his usefulness for God? Just as the church continues to expand and multiply and every day people are being set free from sin and are added to the body of Christ.

This was no tragedy. This was victory! This was triumph! For the moment, he "fell asleep," he awoke in the arms of His Lord.

Scripture

Romans 8:37 (ESV)... more than conquerors through him who loved us.

He received his reward. In fact, Stephen's name in the Greek is *Stephanos*, which means "a crown".

Scripture

2 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV)[7] I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. [8] Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Surely, Stephen heard those words from His Lord, "Well done, my good and faithful servant".

And from his death, fruit would come.

Scripture

John 12:23-24 (ESV)[23] And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. [24] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Stephen died, and the church woke up.

Quote

— *Tertullian*

"The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church"

The fruit that came from Stephen's death is clearly seen in the following pages of the bible. From this point on, persecution against the early church increases, which causes the Christians in Jerusalem to scatter. But what else begins to scatter? THE GOSPEL, for Christians carry the message of Jesus everywhere they go.

But not only this, Stephen's faithful witness left a mark on a man named Saul of Tarsus.

The one whom Stephen, in his final breath, prayed for, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin."

Augustine says, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul".

We know because Saul, now Paul the Apostle, recounts the martyrdom of Stephen over 20 years later in Acts 22. The only other time Stephen is mentioned

Scripture

Acts 22:19-20 (Manual Entry) 19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.'

God answered Stephen's prayer, and Paul was evidence of that.

Application

Christian, Will you die as a faithful follower of Jesus? Will you die believing and proclaiming the truth of the gospel? It is most desirable that death should be the perfecting of our whole career, the putting of the corner-stone upon the edifice, so that when nothing else is wanted to complete the man's labours he falls asleep. Dear brethren, is it so with you? Suppose you were to die this morning in the pews, would your life be a complete life, or would it be like a broken column snapped off in the centre? Let your testimony in life be such that, whether you speak or not in your last moments, there shall be no question about whose you were nor whom you served.- Charles Spurgeon Stephen's example of being a faithful witness for Jesus shows us that God can use ordinary people like us who are empowered by His Spirit to do great things for the Kingdom to His glory.

Yet, even Stephen is an imperfect example. The book of Hebrews tells us to

Scripture

Hebrews 12:2-3 (ESV)[2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. [3] Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Conclusion/Communion

This is exactly what we are going to do right now in our time of Communion.

However, to fully circle back to where we started. Communion is exclusively for the believer who is in Christ.

If you are here this morning and you have never placed your faith in Jesus, the bible says that you are outside of Christ and are in danger of the wrath of Almighty God that is to come.

"Whoever does not believe is condemned already".

Consider right now where you stand with God.

In the old Hymn entitled: The Warning. It says this,

Ye sinners, seek his grace, Whose wrath ye cannot bear; Look to the dying Saviour's face, And find salvation there."

God in His wondrous love and grace has provided the answer to the question, "How must I be saved?"

It was answered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Your sacrifice. The One who took our place, our sin upon Himself. The Lamb of God who was slain for the sins of the world.

Call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

For some, maybe you have been wayward. You have been living a life of sin, but you hate every moment of it. God is calling you back.

Do not delay. Turn from your sin, back to the Father, who loves you

Now you can participate with your family in this special moment.