

The First Martyr in Church History, part 2

(Acts 7:1-16)

10/30/19; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

In case you can't see it well, this is Peanuts comic strip from 1973.

In it, Linus is speaking to Charlie Brown and he announces a desire to be a prophet.

To which, Charlie Brown replies, "That's a fine ambition. The world needs a few good prophets."

But then he tells Linus, "The only trouble is that most prophets turn out to be false prophets."

To which Linus replies, "Maybe I could be a sincere false prophet."

In the world, there is always a need for proclaimers of truth.

Every since the garden of Eden, people need truth to live in a world full of lies and deception.

And God has always had men who boldly declared truth to the world.

Starting with Noah who preached for years to a lost world and continuing up until today with men in pulpits declaring God's truth to the world, the need for truth is ever present.

Now, there have been no shortage of people claiming to speak the truth, but there has been a great shortage of those who actually told the truth.

And of the ones who told the truth, most were killed.

In a sense, Linus would have a better future as a sincere false prophet than a true prophet of God.

And for evidence of that, just ask Stephen.

Here is a man who spent his life as a Jew.

He is in Jerusalem the 2nd of 3 annual Jewish feasts, as he has been for every year of his life.

Yet, while there this year, Stephen hears the preaching of a man named Peter.

Peter is a fellow Jew but he is declaring that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

The same Jesus who had been killed at the 1st Jewish festival of the year just a month and a half earlier.

Through that preaching, Stephen has his eyes and ears opening by God and believes in Christ, and his whole life is changed.

He is now part of a growing group of Jews who are believing in Jesus.

They are remaining in Jerusalem and listening to the preaching of the men associated with Peter who are the apostles.

They are enjoying the fellowship of one another.

They are growing in their understanding of who Jesus is.

They are taking the Lord's Supper together and learning what it means to be a believer in Christ.

Then all of a sudden, a need arises in the church for someone to help with the distribution of food to Jewish widows and Stephen is thrust into a prominent position in the early church.

At the same time, Stephen is also desiring to share the truth of Christ with his fellow Jews.

So he goes into a synagogue in Jerusalem and declares the gospel to his fellow countrymen.

But that leads to trouble for Stephen.

Last week, we looked at verses 8-15 of Acts 6 where Stephen was dragged out the synagogue and put before the Jewish council called the Sanhedrin.

Clearly, they had no desire for Stephen or for his message.

And they intend to do what most people do who reject the truth, they plan to murder the messenger.

However, that will not happen until the moment that God has purposed.

So instead of murdering him quietly, the Jews give him an opportunity to speak, and that speech will fill most of Acts 7.

Now remember, this is an opportunity for Stephen not save his life.

He knows all about the Sanhedrin.

He know they mean business.

He knows that his life hangs in the balance.

Yet, he also knows that each of these men on the council and 1000s of fellow Jews will die and go to hell without the truth about Christ.

So instead of speaking to save his own life, he speaks in hopes of saving all of their lives through the gospel.

Now this chapter is long and will at least two weeks, but before we begin it, I want to take you to the end of Stephen's speech.

You need to see the end so that you will understand what he is doing through the verses that precede the conclusion to it..

So look with me at verses 51-53 of Acts 7..

This is how Stephen ends his message to the high council of the Jews..

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."

First thing that strikes us is the accusations of Stephen.

Here he is standing before men who hold the power of life and death, but he does not bite his tongue.

He does not sugar coat the message.

He declares truth to them and he speaks with clarity.

And the reason for that is desperation of Stephen wanting his fellows Jews to consider the truth of the gospel.

This is a man fully controlled by the Spirit of God.

He is a man filled with faith in God.

And now he speaks the complete truth without any fear of man..

Now, we will look at the conclusion of this sermon in a few weeks, but what I want you to see are two things.

#1 - I want you to see the urgency of evangelism.

For Stephen, his life matter little but the lives of the unsaved matter greatly.

And now that he has a chance to speak, the only thing that matters is the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

His life can be lost if the lives of others are saved.

#2 - I want you to see the strategy of his evangelism.

Look, there is no one size fits all approach to declaring the truth of the gospel to the lost.

Everyone is different and we need to be wise in our approaches.

For Stephen, these people are his people.

He knows them.

He has grown up around them.

He knows their history as a people and a nation.

So what is his strategy for declaring the truth to them?

Well, he is going to use their past as proof of their guilt in the present in hope that they will turn to Christ in the future..

And the blessing for us is that we get to see an incredible summary of much of the Old Testament.

We will also get to see how to do effective and bold evangelism with people we know.

And then a final bonus will be seeing the shadows of Christ in the Old Testament..

So, let's begin this incredible passage back in verses 1-7 of Acts 7..

We will call this..

I. A Common History (1-7)

Verse 1..

The high priest said, “Are these things so?”

Now the question is related to the accusations that have been leveled against Stephen, and the accusations are in the end of chapter 6..

Verse 11..

11 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him [j]before the [k]Council. 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.”

In an effort to quiet the messenger, the Jews had put forth false witnesses to testify of the crimes of Stephen.

And the testimony was that Stephen had spoken blasphemy against Moses and God.

Now isn't the order of that interesting.

The Jews seemed to be more concerned of Stephen blaspheming Moses than they were of his blasphemy against God..

But those weren't the only accusations..

Verse 13 says that Stephen was also accused of speaking against the holy place and the law..

In other words, they charged Stephen with speaking ill of the temple and the law of God.

Now before we get into Stephen's defense, understand a couple things..

#1 - These were false charges.

Verse 13 describes the witnesses as being false witnesses.

But also understand this.

Had Stephen said things about God and Moses and the temple and the law?

I am sure he did.

You see, Jesus didn't come to change the law, he came to fulfill it.

In other words, Jesus was greater than Moses in every way.

Jesus kept the law while dying for the law breaker.

And Jesus also changed the need for a temple.

His people would be the temple as the result of the New Covenant that He established in his blood.

The Spirit of God would not indwell a physical building but the bodies of those who believed.

And it's not that Jesus came to defame Moses or devalue the law or abolish the temple.

He was simply a greater reality of all of those things.

Moses was a preview of Christ.

The Law exposed the need for Christ.

The temple was a place for sacrifices until the once for all sacrifice came.

It is not that Stephen was blaspheming any of those things.

He was simply showing that Jesus was the ultimate reality of all of those things..

But what often happens is that people love the traditions more than the truth, and when that reality is exposed, the result is rarely good..

So Stephen is asked if these accusations are true by the high priest, who but the way is Caiaphas, - the same high priest that Jesus stood before just 2 months earlier.

Here's a picture of what that may have looked like for Stephen.

And in verse 2, Stephen begins his answer to the high priest by going back to the very beginning of Israel's history..

2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in [a]Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'

As Stephen starts to speak to these rulers of Judaism, he does so by establishing common ground with them.

He is not an outsider.

He is not a foreigner.

He is someone on the inside.

Stephen is Jewish to the core.

He even calls this group of men, “Brethren and fathers.”

These are the men that he has looked up to and shared a common faith with for some long.

He has not rolled into town from some Greek university carrying some Gentile philosophy of life.

He was a Jew from birth and he know his Old Testament.

He knows the story of Abraham, the father of the Jews.

And he points out the great faith of Abraham in verse 4..

4 Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in [b]Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it

to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him.

The point is simple.

The Father of the Jews was a man of great faith.

Not only did he leave his native land and settle in a foreign land called Haran.

He eventually left Haran to come to the land of Israel.

But here was the catch, -God didn't allow him to possess a single foot of the promised land.

He lived there as an alien until his death.

Here is a picture to trace the life of Abraham..

The point of these opening verses is simple.

Stephen wants these men to know that he knows them because he is one of them..

And he also wants to remind them that their father Abraham was not a man of great tradition but a man of great faith.

You see, tradition would have kept Abraham in his native land of Ur.

Tradition would have kept Abraham in Haran.

But faith brought him to Israel, and faith had made him the father of the nation that these men and Stephen were now a part of.

And that faith of their father Abraham had now been replaced with their traditions and their customs and their laws to the point that they couldn't even recognize God in the flesh in the person of Christ.

But this is what tradition does.

It swallows up truth and substitutes comfort and familiarity with faith.

Abraham believed God even when it didn't make sense to Him.

These men are now rejecting God because Jesus didn't fit their mold of what Messiah should be.

But Stephen is not done with the life of Abraham yet.

Verse 6..

6 But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would [c]be enslaved and mistreated for four hun-

dred years. 7 ‘And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,’ said God, ‘and after that they will come out and [d]serve Me in this place.

In verses 6-8, Stephen recites more of Jewish history.

God established the nation on the faith of Abraham, but not everything was served on a silver platter to him.

For instance, there would be trouble for Israel initially in the form of a nation named Egypt, who would enslave Israel for 400 years.

That story is told in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus.

Eventually God delivers them from that nation and they came out and settled in the land that was first promised to Israel..

And Stephen’s point is to move from Abraham’s faith to God’s faithfulness..

400 years of trouble for Israel were ended with God’s deliverance of them from Egypt.

And look, I don't want to make too much of this, but God had been silent for 400 years when Jesus came onto the scene.

In other words, Israel had been without a prophet since 400 BC when John the Baptist broke the silence to announce the arrival of Christ.

These 70 men knew that.

They were aware that God had not spoken to Israel through a prophet in 400 years.

And now Christ had come declaring to be the Word of God.

So these two verses are are a subtle reminder that God has shown himself to be a deliverer of Israel.

He does not abandon his people.

God is a rescuer of Israel and he has just the greatest rescue to them in the person of Jesus Christ.

Stephen continues in verse 8..

8 And He gave him [e]the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

And so Stephen has established a great foundation with these men.

He is part of God's covenant people.

He knows Jewish history.

He knows the God that they claim to know.

And look, this is great insight into effective evangelism.

It is good to establish commonality with people as you prepare to share the truth with them.

It is good to identify with them in some way.

Same hometown.

Same state.

Same school.

Same struggles in life.

Same issue of sin and temptation.

There is no need to blast someone out of the water with your first comment or opening sentence.

Find common ground and take people to the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Stephen was wanting to be heard, so he doesn't start with an insult, he starts with a common history.

But now that they are listening, he begins to shift into the point of his speech..

Look at verse 9..

We will call this..

II. A Common Pattern (9-16)

9 “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

11 “Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers [f]could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 On the second visit Joseph [g]made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five [h]persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 From there they were removed to [i]Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of [j]Hamor in [k]Shechem.

Now at first glance, this is simply more history and common ground between Stephen and the Sanhedrin.

All of this is true and recored in Scripture.

In verse 8, Stephen talks about the 12 sons of Jacob.

And in verse 9, he recalls the story of one of those sons named Joseph who was sold into slavery but still used by God to rescue Israel during a famine.

All the Jews that Stephen was speaking to would know the story of Joseph's rescue of Israel in verses 11-16 by heart.

This was ingrained in the hearts and minds of all of Stephen's audience.

It had been in his heart and mind since he was a Jewish boy going to synagogue.

So why does Stephen move his focus from Abraham to Joseph?

Well, first of all it comes next in the story, but more importantly, it points out a tragic pattern in Israel's history.

And that is the pattern of Israel rejecting people that God had chosen.

You see, Joseph possessed the birthright for the 12 sons of Jacob.

Reuben was the firstborn of the 12 but he lost the birthright because he defied his father's bed, according to 1 Chronicles 5.

As a result, the birthright passed to Joseph, but jealously among the other sons of Jacob led them to reject Joseph.

So they sold him into slavery, hoping to find the birthright passed to them..

But the point that Stephen wants to make here is that the Jews have a history of rejecting the one that God had chosen.

Joseph is the first but he is not the last.

The Jews had been stiff necked and resisted the plan of God since their inception.

And now they were stiff necked and resisting the plan of God in the person of Jesus Christ, whom God had chosen before the foundation of the world.

Though Jesus came to save his people from their sin, the Jews responded to Him like they had responded to so many that God had sent to them in their history.

They grew jealous of his following and rejected him to the point of death.

Ultimately, Joseph's treatment was a shadow of the Jewish treatment of Christ.

God chosen One rejected by those who should have known better.

So Stephen is beginning to turn this history of Israel into an indictment against them.

Their rejection of Christ as Messiah is nothing more than what they have done their entire history as a nation.

And if they want act like their father Abraham and put their faith in God's chosen one, it will be another example of Israel's loving their laws and traditions more than loving their God.

We will stop right there for tonight because Stephen has much to say about their stubbornness coming up in their relationship to Moses..

Conclusion

So what can we pull out and apply tonight?

#1 - Be prepared for evangelistic opportunities.

It doesn't seem that Stephen was planning to stand before the 70 most powerful men in Judaism and proclaim Christ.

He simply went into a small synagogue to preach but ended up in the most influential place in all of Israel.

And when given a chance to speak, he stood boldly and preached biblically.

You may never know when the opportunity for gospel proclamation may come.

You may at work, at a school event, in a doctor's office, at Walmart, or at a family gathering.

We rarely know beforehand when a conversation will turn spiritual.

Our job is to simply know the truth well enough to speak it when given an opportunity.

And the way to be prepared leads to point #2..

#2 - Be prepared to defend your faith from Scripture.

Look, there is nothing wrong with your personal potency of salvation and even your personal experience.

But don't make evangelism your opinion versus their opinion.

Make it God's truth versus man's lies.

All truth comes from God, and anything that opposes God's truth is a result of man's own sinful imagination or tradition.

Stephen didn't make this into a "he said" versus "they said" event.

Instead, Stephen took his audience to the word of God and made it the center of the speech.

In that way, the argument is not man to man, but man to God.

#3 - Be prepared to see Christ in everything.

I love the OT.

I love preaching it and reading it.

It offers great examples of what to do and not to do as a believer even today.

And though Jesus is not the focus of every verse, the coming Christ is all over the OT.

You see Jesus in Joseph.

You see Jesus in Moses.

You see Jesus in the sacrificial system and the lamb of Passover..

Stephen didn't twist verses to make them about Jesus.

He simply used people and history to find Christ.

Look, be shrewd in your evangelism.

Be creative.

Be thinking about how to find Christ in every conversation with a person.

You don't have to be weird and awkward.

Just look for the gospel in life and use those moments to speak the truth of Christ to others.

Stephen did.

And I pray that we will as well.

Let us pray.