

The First Martyr in Church History, part 4

(Acts 7:54-60)

11/13/19; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

In August of 1944, two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, effectively ended World War 2.

One of the bombs was nicknamed Little Boy because to its small size.

It was 10 feet long and less than 3 feet wide.

However, when the bomb was dropped and exploded, it destroyed everything within 1 mile of its landing spot.

It created a surface temperature of 10,830 degrees Fahrenheit.

It sent a firestorm that ran 2 miles in every direction from the detonation point.

It leveled buildings and vegetation and killed 1000s instantly.

Needless to say, Little Boy made a gigantic impression.

The same can be said for so many things in life.

Your phones and computer are able to run on the small of processors.

Your car moves the road due to smallest of explosions.

Your heart beats right now due to the tiniest of electrical impulses.

As the saying, dynamite comes in the smallest of packages.

Well, that is a very good description of Stephen.

Here is a man that the Bible only devotes two chapters to, but here is man that made the biggest of impacts on the church.

He bursts on the scene in Acts 6 to head up the distribution of food to Jewish widows and he died by the end of Acts 7.

But in the middle of that, Stephen makes a huge impact on the church.

And our blessing is that we get to learn from his example.

Tonight, we finish up our time with Stephen as we examine his death at the hands of the Jews.

Let's begin in verse 54, and will call this..

I. The Conviction of Truth (54)

54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

We first need to ask ourselves who is the “they” of verse 54?

If you have been here, you know exactly the “they” are.

This is Jewish Council, also known as the Sanhedrin.

Stephen has been in front of these men for the entirety of Acts 7.

He was drug there in Acts 6 by the leaders of a synagogue located in Jerusalem.

Stephen had entered that synagogue to share the truth of the gospel with them.

They had argued with him, but in the end, the leaders of that synagogue were unable to cope with the wisdom and truth of Stephen.

So they drug him out and sent him their supreme court, which was made of 70 high ranking and the high priest of Israel.

I showed you this picture a few weeks ago that gives some idea of what that setup may have looked like as Stephen stood before the council.

And we took the past two weeks to look at what Stephen said to these men.

He first established that he was one of them.

He was Jewish.

He was descendant of Abraham.

He knew his Jewish history, and he knew the stories of the patriarchs that founded Judaism.

Now this was music to the Sanhedrin's ears.

They loved their history and their rich traditions.

But over the course of his speech to them, Stephen began to turn the tables on them.

Though their history was an incredible story of Gods' grace, it was not always pretty.

In fact, if not for the grace of God, Israel would have never made it.

And to prove his point, Stephen pointed out 3 examples of Jewish sins.

The first example was the story of Joseph, who was rejected by his own brothers even though he was God's chosen one.

The next example was the person of Moses, whom the Jews rejected when he first came to them to deliver them from the Egyptians.

And then was rejected a second time by the Jews after he led them out but they desired to turn and go back to Egypt.

And the final example of Jewish sin was their idolatry of tabernacle and temple, where the Jews sought to confine God to something they built with their own hands.

In each instance and plenty of others, the Jewish people were simply resistant to the plans of God.

God wanted to use Joseph, but the Jews said no.

God wanted to use Moses, but the Jews said no.

God wanted the tabernacle and temple to be as places of worship, but the Jews ended up worshipped the building and not the God of the building.

And in the end of his speech to the Sanhedrin,
Joseph uses their own history against them.

Look back at verse 51..

***51 “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircum-
cised 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 be-
come; 53 you who received the law as ordained by
angels, and yet did not keep it.”***

Long story short, the current Jews were keeping
alive the family tradition of saying they loved God
but rejecting with their lives.

And the latest example was their rejection of Christ.

God’s own Son had been sent to them, but they had
despised him and murdered him just like their an-
cestors had done.

And this is stinging rebuke.

It is one thing to tell someone that they are wrong,
but it is much worse to tell them that their entire
family and tradition have been wrong.

As we say here in the South, “those are fighting words.”

The only problem is that Stephen was exactly right.

The Jews had lived in darkness for years.

They were lost just like the parents and grandparents before them.

And though Stephen realizes that they hold his life in their hands, his love of them compels him to tell them the truth.

But as you know, they didn’t reposed with love and kindness at hearing the truth.

Instead, they responded with violence.

Back to verse 54.

The text says that they were cut to the quick.

The Greek here means to be sawn in two.

These Jewish leaders were cut to the heart.

They were convicted of their own sinful rebellion.

They were convicted of their own sinful history.

But instead of repentance and confession, they gnashed their teeth at Stephen.

As kid, I used to grind my teeth at night.

My dentist was close to giving a night guard to prevent it but it eventually improved.

The reason for it?

Well, it is sometimes caused by improper teeth alignment.

But the most common cause is childhood anxiety or stress.

I can assure that these were grinding their teeth at Stephen because he hit a nerve.

He diagnosed them properly.

They were no better than their fathers who rejected Jospeh and Moses and made too much of the temple.

They were guilty as charged, and instead of a contrite and broken heart, they clinched their jaws and balled up their fists.

Look at Psalm **37:12...**

12

***The wicked plots against the righteous
And gnashes at him with his teeth.***

At this point, the Sanhedrin are like a dog in the cage with the rabbit just outside..

They are ready to pounce on Stephen, so what does Stephen do?

Is he backing up and trying to get one foot out of the door?

Is he preparing for fight?

No at all..

Let's look at what we will call..

II. The Contentment of Belief (55-56)

Verse 55..

55 But being full of the Holy Spirit,

We can stop right there for a second.

This has been the description of Stephen ever since we met him back in Acts 6..

But what a description it is.

And to make it clear, this doesn't suggest that some are given more of the Spirit than others.

It simply reflects someone who is walking by the Spirit in the maximum way possible.

Stephen is not living the marginal Christian life.

Stephen is not just getting by.

Stephen is a man totally dependent upon the Spirit in every way.

He is not toying with sin.

He is not a man who is saying, "Well I know I shouldn't, but.."

He is man who is living by faith.

Stephen is not an example of how much Spirit do we have, he is an example of how much does the Spirit have us.

And he is fully walking by the Spirit here.

So, there is no panic.

There is no anxiety.

There is calm reliance upon the Lord even when he is surrounded by men gnashing their teeth to get at him.

While most people would be looking around to see what was coming at them, Stephen simply looks up..

Back to verse 55..

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;

Though the saying may be overused, believers often need to get their eyes off of the things that surround them and put them up to the God who is over them.

Stephen knows that there is no way out from this council.

He may not realize he is about to die, but he certainly knows that God is his only source of help in the midst of these evil men.

So he looks up, and instead of seeing the roof or the sky, he sees straight into heaven.

Clearly, a miracle of God to give Stephen such a sight.

Few have had the privilege of seeing the glory of God in Scripture.

Adam and Eve in the garden.

Moses on the mountaintop.

Peter, James, and John on the mount of Transfiguration.

Paul being called up to the third heaven.

John being visited by Christ in the opening to the book of Revelation.

It is not your normal everyday activity of looking up and seeing the literal glory of God.

But it is what happened to Stephen as he stood before the Sanhedrin.

What a sight to behold.

What a privilege for Stephen.

Stephen also see Christ at the right hand of the Father as he is given a glimpse of heaven..

And note the posture of Christ.

He is standing, which is not his normal position.

Jesus is normally seated at the right hand of God.

But as Stephen catches sight of heaven, Jesus stands.

And why does he stand?

He stands to defend his own.

He stands to encourage Stephen.

He stands as he prepares to welcome the first Christian martyr to heaven.

He stands because he loves his own to the very end.

In response to what he is seeing Stephen simply says in verse 56..

“Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

The Son of Man was a title that Jesus used to describe Himself in front of this very group of Jewish leaders just a few months earlier.

In Mark 14, Jesus was being questioned by Caiaphas about his identity..

Mark 14:60..

60 The high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, “Do You not answer? [aa]What is it that these men are testifying against You?” 61 But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and [ab]saying to Him, “Are You [ac]the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” 62 And Jesus said, “I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” 63 Tearing his clothes, the high priest *said, “What further need do we have of witnesses? 64 You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?” And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death..

And now as Stephen catches sight of Christ in heaven, he tells these men that the Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God.

Well, these Jews are no dummies.

They know that this is a reference to Jesus being the Messiah.

They know that Stephen is accusing them of killing their Messiah.

They put all the pieces of the message together, and there is but one option...

He must be silenced...

So let's look at the contempt of unbelief..

III. The Contempt of Unbelief (57-58)

57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

When Tonya and I were dating, we spent a lot to time at her house.

Her family had a pool and she has two younger brothers, and we often swam together.

Well, her brothers would stay in that pool all day if given the chance.

In fact, when their mom would come out the back door and call them to come in, her brothers were go under water to avoid hearing her.

It got to be funny until her dad would come out and the fun needed real soon.

Well, this is this picture of the Sanhedrin here, acting like little boys with their hands over their ears as Stephen spoke about seeing Jesus.

They covered their ears and the rushed at him with one impulse..

This is mob rule.

This is a group of unbelievers action in unison to silence the truth.

This is the sadness of unbelief.

Instead of considering the truth, they try to crush it.

Let me add something here that you need to understand.

There have been plenty of people who come through those doors and don't hang around.

Most of the time, it has nothing to do with you.

As far as I know, this is a very kind and welcoming group of people.

I see many of you speak to visitors and try to engage and welcome them.

But yet, we still see people come and go.

Look, I tend to take it personal too.

Is it the preaching?

Is it the service?

Is there something I could have done differently?

But let me tell you something.

Truth either attracts or repels.

And we teach truth here.

It is not always the best preaching or teaching.

But it is always truth, and for some, they don't want the truth.

And since they would go to jail for rushing the stage and attacking the messenger, they should choose to go somewhere else.

Now, that is not always the case, but many times, churches see a rotation of faces simply because not everyone is interested in hearing the truth.

Ultimately, we need to be kind and welcoming and friendly, but we also need to realize that some people simply cover their ears by not coming back.

And that is okay.

We will simply pray that their ears are one day opened to the truth.

Stephen was preaching to a bunch of deaf ears, so they rush in to put their hands over his mouth and end his life..

Verse 58..

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.

The Jews would not apply the death penalty inside the city of Jerusalem, so they drive Stephen out of town..

And they begin stoning him..

Not what is odd here is that the Jews did not have the power to kill anyone.

They told that to Pilate just months ago when they sought to kill Jesus.

But now in a fit of rage, they have no problem stoning Stephen.

In fact, they take off their robes to take better aim with the rocks that they are throwing at him.

And note who is standing as a witness to Stephen's stoning.

It is Saul of Tarsus.

The same Saul who will meet Jesus on the road to Damascus and be converted to a man named Paul who become a missionary to the world.

It is quite likely that Saul was with Stephen ever since he stood in the first synagogue to preach back in Acts.

It is possible that he followed along as they dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin.

Saul now ends up as a witness to the first martyr in church, which he will also become years later..

And how does the scene end?

Well it isn't the fairy tale ended we may have hoped for, but it is a picture of great hope and joy..

Let's call these final two verses..

IV. The Cries of Confidence (59-60)

Verse 59..

59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

So much for the wrong idea that you die and go to sleep.

Here Stephen calls on Jesus to receive his spirit.

Stephen is not dying and then being laid to rest.

He is dying and his spirit goes to heaven while his empty body is laid to rest.

And you have the confidence of Stephen.

He has no problem in calling on Christ to receive him to heaven.

This is the blessed assurance that the believer has.

Death is not an end of life.

It is simple the beginning of true life.

To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

As Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

While these men thought they were having the final word by stoning Stephen, they were simply hastening his eternal reward.

Jesus did receive Stephen's spirit on that day and Stephen is with Christ tonight, awaiting the resurrection of his body when Christ returns to rapture the church.

This is the hope of the believer.

To die and go to Christ.

There's no hope in dying and going to sleep for a while.

Our hope is to leave our bodies behind while our spirits go to be with Christ.

But that is not the final words of this scene.

Verse 60..

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 [a]fell asleep.

Only a man filled with the Spirit can pray for his enemies while they strike him with stones.

This is reminiscent of Christ who offered the same prayer for his executioners.

Oh to have a heart for evangelism like Stephen.

To walk into a hostile Jewish synagogues and preach the truth.

To stand before the 71 most important men in Judaism and call them to repentance.

And now to fall from the blows of the stones that these same men are hurling at them while praying for their forgiveness is the epitome of an evangelistic heart.

Lord, take my life but spare their sin.

May God give us all the courage of Stephen to pray for our enemies with our final breath.

Conclusion

So the first martyr in church history dies, and the stage is set for the spread of the gospel, which we will look at in the next few chapters..

But before we leave Stephen, let's consider a few principles we can apply from his life..

#1 - Break family tradition

Stephen was fully Jewish.

Raised in synagogue.

Taught the same truth as every other Jew around him.

Yet, Stephen recognized the shortcomings of his own family and tradition.

He saw their rebellion toward Moses and Joseph.

He saw their elevation of the temple over the God of the temple.

And he was not going to become what they were.

His family's tradition was to reject the men who brought them truth, but that was not going to be his tradition.

He would not be another Jew who resisted God.

He would break the tradition and respond to the truth.

Look, family ties and traditions die hard, but is it better to see them die than to die without Christ.

Look, truth divides, and sometimes it divides even the closest of family relationships.

Jesus said..

34 “Do not think that I came to [ac]bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36 and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household.

37 “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

In the Jews loved their families more than they loved Christ, and that is still a danger even today.

Let me remind you tonight.

There is nothing wrong with family.

God established family and he is honored by it.

By when it comes to family or truth, there is no contest.

Be willing to break from family traditions to fully follow Christ.

#2 - *Love the lost.*

It is easy to look at the story of Stephen and see the Jews as the enemy.

But I can assure that Stephen never saw them that way.

AS they dragged him off to the Sanhedrin, as they dragged him to his death, Stephen loved these people to the end.

It is hard to see our opposition as our mission field, but that is exactly what they are.

Every time you have the chance to share the truth with others, share it because you love people and not because you are mad at them.

The short life and ministry of Stephen is a ministry of love for those around him.

#3 - Keep your eyes on heaven.

Listen to me church.

It is so easy to lose eternal perspective while living on the earth.

It is so easy to get caught up in how the world acts and talks that we lose all sense of who we are as believers.

I love how Stephen looked to heaven in his time of need.

It is great reminder of our need to do the same.

Constantly ask yourself these question..

What is the eternal impact of what I am doing?

What will be the value of this in heaven?

If you let those questions drive your life, you will spend less time of needless things and more time on important things.

Stephen understood the urgency and supreme importance of the gospel and that drove his life up until his very last breath.

May we all be just as faithful. LET US PRAY.