

Stephen

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Date: 02 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Great to see you all this morning. Well, this morning we are going to be continuing our study in the book of Acts. And as Grace mentioned, this morning we are coming in our study of the book of Acts to a person called Stephen.

And we're told about Stephen from Acts chapter 6 to chapter 7, verse 60. So this is a very long portion of scripture.

It spans over two fairly long chapters. I'm not going to read it all this morning. We're going to try to consider it all this morning. But I'm going to read parts of it. So here we go.

Acts chapter 6, starting at verse 8. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

Opposition arose, however, from the members of the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called. Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Sicilia and Asia, who began to argue with Stephen.

[1 : 17] But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, Are these charges true? Just holding it there for a second, this is where Stephen starts his fairly lengthy sermon, from chapter 7, verse 2, to chapter 7, verse 53.

And Grace was sharing a little bit about Stephen's sermon. Stephen, basically in his sermon, is highlighting in different ways that there's only salvation in Jesus.

[2 : 44] So just leaving his sermon just for a moment, and then coming down to verse 54 of chapter 7. When Stephen finished his sermon, we read, When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him.

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he had said this, he fell asleep.

[4 : 03] And folks, that is the story of Stephen. Has anyone here ever heard of the phrase or the expression the man, the myth, and the legend?

You know, there's often a cup or maybe a t-shirt and there's a name and then it says the man, the myth, and the legend. It's a phrase that kind of highlights or points to someone's very unique life or characteristics.

The man, the myth, the legend. I was just wondering just out of interest. Put your hand up. Yes, Helen, put your hand up if you have ever come across this phrase or heard it at any time in your life.

The man, the myth, and the legend. Well, it's good to see a few people have heard of the phrase the man, the myth, and the legend. Well, I've got to show you this. I have a cup with me this morning and it says Rob, the man, the myth, and the legend and I'm going to drink my coffee out of this cup this morning.

Well, the reason why I mention this is because this is kind of what came to my mind when we were looking at Stephen. But instead of looking at the man, the myth, and the legend, as we look at Stephen and as we look at his unique life and characteristics, we're not going to look at the man, the myth, the legend.

[5 : 29] We're instead going to look at Stephen, the man, the message, and the martyr. If Stephen had a cup, this would be on Stephen's cup or if he had a t-shirt, this would be on his t-shirt.

The man, the message, and the martyr. And as we briefly look at each of these things, I just want to highlight one thing that I think we can learn from each one of these things.

So first, what can we learn or be reminded of looking at Stephen, the man? Well, looking at Stephen, we can clearly see in these few chapters that he was full of the Holy Spirit.

Often anything that is repeated in chapters or verses is noteworthy and it's repeated purposefully to kind of draw our attention to it.

Well, here we see in Acts chapter 6, verse 3, we see that Stephen was one who was full of the Spirit. In Acts 6, 5, we see that he was one who was full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 41] In Acts 6, 8, Stephen was one of full of grace and power. Acts chapter 7, verse 55, we see that Stephen was one full of the Holy Spirit.

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, clearly wants us to note, I think, and pick up on the fact that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He repeats it several times for us to take note of.

Well, I think one reason why Luke does this is to simply remind us that believers are indeed filled with the Holy Spirit.

And we know that this is true looking back at Acts chapter 2. At Pentecost, we see that all the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. Looking back at Acts chapter 4, we read that God's power and grace was at work in them all.

All of God's people are filled with the Holy Spirit, just like the prophet Joel said it would be this side of Pentecost. And Stephen here is a fresh reminder to us of this truth that believers, all believers, are indeed filled with the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 06] Now, this might sound like a very, very simple thing, and maybe it might not be new to any of us or many of us, but yeah, I think sometimes as believers, we can, I think, in the busyness of our lives, somehow kind of forget about the simplest things, like as believers, we have the Holy Spirit living in us, and greater is he who is living in us than he who lives in the world.

Stephen, I think, is a simple reminder that as believers, we have not been left alone. he reminds us that all believers are filled with the Holy Spirit, just like he was.

And I just wonder, whatever it is that we might be going through, whatever it is you might be going through, just want to encourage you as a believer, you have the Holy Spirit living in you, and he will help you to press on with whatever it is that you're facing.

So that's Stephen, the man. Well, what can we learn from Stephen, the message? Verses 2 to 53 in chapter 7.

Well, Stephen's sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts. It's about twice as long as Peter's sermon after Pentecost, and I would encourage you, maybe at the picnic we could read Stephen's sermon because I'm not reading it this morning, but for now just to summarize and to kind of just jump on what Grace was sharing, Stephen in his sermon basically used Scripture, I think, to highlight one main central truth, and that is only Jesus can save.

[10 : 05] Stephen, through his sermon, highlights that the law can't ultimately save, he highlights that the temple can't ultimately save, he highlights that where you were born can't ultimately save, your status can't ultimately save.

Stephen's one central message is that there's only salvation in Jesus. I think he basically highlights in different ways that relying on anything else or anyone else for salvation will ultimately bring judgment.

Relying on works, relying on efforts, relying on religion, relying on status, will ultimately lead to judgment.

Only Jesus can save. Jesus himself said in John 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me.

Again, a very simple but important reminder for us all, only Jesus can save. A message that would cost even his life.

[11 : 21] Remember verse 54? After his message, after they heard this, they were furious, and they gnashed their teeth at him. I mean, how aggressive can you get?

Gnashing your teeth at someone is almost like something a wild animal would do. They gnashed their teeth at him, and they condemned him to death.

So lastly, what can we learn from Stephen the martyr? What can we learn from his death? Stephen was the first martyr in the early church, and as someone said, he was the first of many, and that many is continuing today.

I think every five minutes, one group said someone dies for their faith in the world. So Stephen in the early church was the first of many.

and the big thing that I want to point out, looking at Stephen's death, is as believers, we do not need to fear death.

[12 : 38] I think looking at these verses, I think it's clear that Stephen did not fear death. Instead, he seemed to so bravely and graciously, thinking about others, faced death without fear.

Just want to read verses 59 and 60 of chapter 7 again. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he said this, he fell asleep.

How incredible is that? In facing certain death for his faith in Jesus, Stephen did not seem to cry out in fear. He did not seem to be agitated.

He did not seem to be angry. No, instead, in a very Christ-like way, he prayed to his Savior to not hold the sins of the people who were wrongly ending his life against them.

[13 : 55] Stephen, in the face of death, did not fear. He did not panic. He did not seem to be agitated.

No, instead, graciously thinking about others, he faced death without fear. You see, Stephen, he knew his Savior, his Savior knew him, and he knew where he was going.

Stephen, in verse 55, in what is an incredible moment, looked up to heaven and saw Jesus standing, ready to welcome him home.

He knew his Savior, his Savior knew him, and he knew where he was going. And with that comfort, and with that certainty, of knowing where he was going, and knowing who he was going to, Stephen was able to face death, graciously, thinking about others, and without fear.

I just want to say that just like Stephen, all of us as believers here this morning, we know our Savior, our Savior knows us, and we know where we are going, so just like Stephen, we do not need to fear death, however it might come to us.

[15 : 30] us. We as believers, we don't need to fear dying, because death for us will be Jesus welcoming us with open arms, bringing us to our guaranteed heavenly home to be in his perfect presence forever and ever, with no more pain, or suffering, or sorrow, or weeping, or sin, or worry.

As Paul said in Philippians 1, 21, for him as a believer to die is gain. For us as believers, to die is gain, because the best is yet to come.

To live is Christ, to live is to know him as our Savior, and to have life and life to the full, but even with that, to die is gain. And the world can't say that.

To die is gain. So just like Stephen, because we know our Savior, because we know where we are going, we can walk to death and true death with no fear.

The best is yet to come. J.C. Ryle has a book that records the story of five men who died for their fate, who were martyred for their fate during the reign of Queen Mary.

[16 : 59] And the first of those men was a man called John Rogers. And John Rogers is described as the first leading English reformer who broke the ice as the first martyr in Queen Mary's reign.

And Ryle writes, on the morning of his martyrdom, Rogers was brought quickly from his cell. He was hardly given time to dress himself. As he made his journey to the stake, he was led to walk past the church where he preached Christ, and was led through the community that he pastored.

Close to the place of execution stood his wife and ten children. One was a baby. They were not permitted to see him while he was locked away. So this was the first glimpse that they saw of him in

weeks, since his abrupt arrest.

He saw them, but was not allowed to stop and say goodbye. A massive crowd lined the streets. Every inch of the footpath and road was covered.

All were out to watch. As Rogers walked past his family, and as he walked to the stake, he was heard repeating out loud the 51st Psalm.

[18 : 22] Well, when the crowds heard this, and when they saw John Rogers walking steadily and calmly to his fiery grave, the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds.

To the disgust of Queen Mary, the crowd filled the air with thunderous applause in support of Mr. Rogers. He went to the stake and was set alight.

But listen to this. The French ambassador at the time was present and witnessed all of this, and this is on record.

He wrote home to France a description of what he saw. He wrote, quote, it was incredible. Rogers went to his death as if he was walking to his wedding.

For us as believers, just like Mr. Rogers, just like Stephen, we can go to our death, whatever that is for each one of us, as if we are walking to our wedding.

[19 : 34] Because we know our Savior, our Savior knows us, and we know where we are going.

The best is yet to come. We can go to our death as if we're walking to our wedding, as if we're walking down the road to a friend's house, or if we're walking down the town to get some sweets in the sweet shop.

We can walk to our death with joy in our hearts. Because the best is yet to come. God, we know our Savior, and we know where we are going.

For us as believers, to die is gain. So folks, looking at Stephen, looking at his life, and looking at his death, we have these simple reminders.

All believers are filled with the Holy Spirit. Stephen is just one example of that. As believers, each one of us are examples of that. Only Jesus can save.

A message that we desperately need to cling on to. And as believers, we do not need to fear death, because the best is yet to come. We can walk to it as if we are walking to our wedding.

[20 : 48] Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that you have included in your word this account of Stephen. And we thank you that as we look at Stephen's life and death, we can take so much encouragement.

Lord, we can just see again that we have not been left alone. We all, as believers, have the Holy Spirit living in us. And may that encourage us that we are not alone, that you will help us as we walk through this life.

And help us just to always remember, Lord, that you're the only one who can save. So, Lord, give us a thankfulness in our heart that you saved us, but also give us a sense of urgency to share with our words and our actions with others that only you can save.

And, Lord, it just seems most of all we thank you so much that as believers we do not need to fear death. Thank you that for us as believers, death is gain. It's like walking from one room into the next.

It's no big deal for us as believers because of what you have done for us. The best is yet to come, and we thank you for that, Lord. We look forward to that day when we will be with you forever and ever.

[21 : 58] But for now, Lord, we thank you that you're with us and we have each other as we journey on in this life together. So, Lord, help us to worship you now with thankful hearts for all that we have in you.

And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.