

The First Martyr

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome here for this Sunday, August 25th, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon. Maybe you know that. It's my joy to be back here. I had a few people say, what'd you do on your holidays? What was exciting? What happened? Well, one eventful thing happened on August 4th. I passed a 7mm kidney stone. But the good news is the diameter of the tube that it has to pass through is between 5 and 7mm. It is close. So I'm grateful to God for that because our sister, Michelle's sister-in-law, my sister-in-law, when we were down visiting in southern Alberta, a friend of hers had just been admitted to emergency. They did some scans and things and said, oh, you have a 7mm kidney stone.

We're going to call a urologist in because you cannot pass that on your own. We have to put you under and have it removed and yada, yada, yada. Michelle and I both went, whew. So I do not recommend it. That is not a fun thing to do on your holidays, but this too shall pass.

Yeah, I'm sorry. Couldn't resist. So there's some news. Good rest, safe travels, all good things, good connections with family and friends, good times spent in the mountains, which I sorely needed.

So it's, but it is good to be back. I have missed you. So we're picking up in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All of the Worlds. And before we do that, I want to thank as well, Paul Hay for preaching for me. It's funny. We said he and I joke about this and then we joked with a few people coming in this morning that it's good for me to be able to spell him off. So it's, yeah. And I actually said to him, we had an elders meeting this week and I said, well, I took a survey and no one's that interested in me coming back. So have at her. It's all you. He didn't like that too much. So I'm grateful for, to have a brother who has the kind of heart and experience and, and knowledge to share with you when I can't be here. And I'm also grateful, deeply grateful to Pastor Luwam from the Kachin Church who came and preached, as many of you know, on a Sunday when his new baby girl was born.

So I said to him, I broke a toe one Sunday morning before I preached. You had a baby. I think you win. Or St. Pan wins. So, so it's, but it is good to be back. And it is a huge weight off my mind to know that you're in good hands when I'm not able to be here. So again, we're picking up in our sermon series, Acts to all the world, as we look at the New Testament book of Acts. And over the past several weeks, we've recognized that as the early church grew, persecution towards it also grew and intensified.

[2 : 5 5] So that's a bit of a reminder of where we're at. In Acts 4, we learned that initially the apostles were detained and warned not to preach about Jesus. Remember that? In Acts 5, we learned that the religious leaders of the time made more arrests. They arrested more of the apostles. And this time, beatings accompanied the warnings. And in our most recent sermon on this series, a few weeks ago now, we considered that the apostles appointed seven leaders with input from all the believers.

Do you remember that? One of those men in that list of seven was Stephen. And Stephen would ultimately be the victim of the next escalation in the persecution of the church. So if you want to turn in your Bibles, our focus passage of this morning is found in Acts 6, verse 8, and continuing until chapter 7, verse 1. So you can turn in your Bibles, Acts 6, verses 8, continuing 7, 1, and I'll also read it for us. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the synagogue of the freed men, as it was called, Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, who began to argue with Stephen. 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 stopped 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?

This is a fitting passage to me, a fitting place in the history of the early church, where we're recognizing challenges and defense and statements and a little familiar, right, with things in the world right now. So as you likely know, we talked about it a few weeks ago, Stephen is unfortunately introduced in that list of seven people as Stephen, who, by the way, was the first martyr. So if Stephen had read that and not known, it might have been a surprise. So that is how he is known. That is a factor in Stephen's identity that is important in the account of Acts. So he was a man who was, as Acts 6 verse 5 tells us, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. So Stephen's example has inspired many people and given them the courage to suffer for Christ in their own lives. Maybe Stephen's story has inspired you in that way. So our sermon this morning is titled, The First Martyr. And I want to take a little bit of time to look at Stephen's story before we consider how it applies to our own lives. Does that sound all right? So Stephen's arrest was prompted by his work and his ministry. And as we've heard this morning, he was a man full of God's grace and power. And also it continues to say that he performed great wonders and signs among the people. So by being associated with this early group of church leaders, Stephen had a reputation, right? They were already in trouble. They were already on people's radar in good ways and in bad ways. And Stephen stood up to many people who were opposed to God's message. But then scripture tells us they were unable to resist the wisdom and power of the Spirit at work in him. Stephen did do this on his own. Stephen was inspired by, filled with the

[7 : 14] Holy Spirit in a way that was attention-getting, that was controversial, but also confident and courageous and powerful. People in the crowd brought false accusations of blasphemy against Stephen, as we've heard. And that led to the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of the time, having him arrested. Now this is a common action for the apostles at this time, right? I'm going to go and preach and I'm in jail again. But they knew by this, have you ever felt this in your life, when things are, when you're seeking after God, when you're being diligent in your prayer life, when you're studying the Word, when you're seeking after God, is that the time for you when things tend to get hard? Right? If anyone ever says to us, oh, the Christian life is easy, if you feel it's easy, you may, I'm going to challenge you, you may be doing it wrong. Or you may not be seeking after God in the way you think you are. Because in my experience, you stand up for Jesus, and it paints a huge target on your back. So we've heard this morning that people were opposed to Stephen and his message. That they even planted false witnesses, now that really stands out, planted false witnesses who would bring charges against him. So they didn't even necessarily have a case against him, but they ensured that he would be arrested. They ensured that he would be brought before the authorities for blasphemy against the temple and blasphemy against the law of Moses.

So you probably know, or you can assume, these would have been very strong charges in the eyes of the religious leaders at the time. These would have been huge no-nos. So in his preaching and teaching, Stephen may have actually referred to what Jesus spoke about in Mark 14. So we hear a hint of this.

Jesus said that he would destroy the temple and it would be rebuilt in three days. So some people took it very literally. Have you ever done that? Maybe the first time you read that account, you said, Jesus is going to destroy the temple? How's he going to do that? That's not what he meant. But people took it literally, right? Jesus was referring metaphorically to his own death, and yet people took it literally that he was saying he would destroy the temple.

So then in preaching about Jesus, Stephen wouldn't have been disrespecting the law of Moses, but he would actually have been sharing how Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of that law.

Do you see that? Jesus wasn't running Moses down, wasn't questioning Moses' authority or his calling or anything like that. He was drawing a line between Moses and God's work at that time and the fulfillment in Christ. But it's often human nature to hear what we want to hear, isn't it?

[10 : 20] That's something else I think we hear and see in the world around us right now. So we hear this morning that everyone who's in the council looked intently at Stephen, and scripture says

that he had the face of an angel. So how do we interpret that? Good question.

He was filled with peace. He was filled with courage. He was filled with confidence. It came from, as we've talked about, the Holy Spirit. And he had this outlook, had this aspect about him, even as these charges, serious charges, were brought against him. Stephen didn't hesitate.

He brought his own defense. And we read about it in detail in Acts 7. And I'll leave that for you to read on your own. It is there. But I encourage you to do it. Please read Acts 7, because you'll hear Stephen's response to the charges brought against him. And it, my friends, is comprehensive. So, but I'm going to summarize it a bit for us this morning. So in Acts 7, 2 to 8, Stephen recounts the story of Abraham and how God was with him, how God called him to leave Mesopotamia and journey through Canaan, making the covenant of circumcision, promising blessing on his descendants, Isaac and Jacob. Then Stephen goes on in Acts 7, verse 9. He picks up the story of Jacob being sold into slavery in Egypt, eventually becoming a man of influence and status. Before Jacob and his sons moved to Egypt, he says, moved to Egypt during the famine. And then the patriarchs, Stephen recounts, were eventually buried in Canaan. Then beginning in Acts 7, verse 17, Stephen recounts God's work for and through Moses, including Moses' upbringing and development in Egypt, fleeing to Midian, encountering God at Mount Sinai, and then returning to Egypt to liberate the children of Israel and lead them into the desert in freedom. So two themes I found emerge from Stephen's defense.

First, God's faithfulness to his people in caring for them and giving them prophets to lead and guide them. And then the second theme that emerges is the people stubborn and even violent at times, rejection of the very people God has sent to lead them. Right? We hear what we want to hear.

[12:55] We see what we want to see. In Acts 7, verse 51, Stephen charges the council of resisting the Holy Spirit like their fathers. Ouch. In Acts 7, verse 52, he declares that their fathers persecuted and killed the prophets and ultimately Jesus as well. Ouch. Number two.

Then in Acts 7, verse 53, Stephen declares that they received God's law. They received it just like anyone, but they didn't keep it. Stephen, what are you doing? Throughout Acts 7, Stephen gives a survey of Israel's history of rejecting God and his spirit. Then he charges that these people who are listening to him followed in their father's rebellion, having murdered, he says, the just one, Jesus. In defending himself, Stephen essentially boldly declares that they themselves have not kept the law. They accuse him of having blasphemed against it. And he's saying, yeah, that's fine. That's actually not true. And you're actually the ones who have not obeyed the law.

Hear that a lot lately too, right? Oh no, I'm not this. You're this. I'm not that. You're that.

Hear that in the dialogue that's going on a lot these days? So Stephen has done this. Stephen has said these things. So we shouldn't be too surprised, unfortunately, at the result. Acts 7, verse 54, gives us the reaction. And I'll read it and you can follow along. 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. In response, the council we read cried out in a loud voice, ran at Stephen and threw him out of the city. We also read that the witnesses laid their clothes at Saul's feet. Interesting, right? Maybe to keep their outer robes free from dirt for what they were about to do or even blood. And it was actually Saul who consented to Stephen's death. He gave the green light. And as we know, Saul would later lead a great persecution against the church. Teaser, God had other plans. So Stephen's execution by stoning is a tragic and powerful event in the history of the church and in its persecution. We see it escalating more dramatically all the time. And they stoned him, even as he cried out to God, to receive his spirit, to not judge his accusers. And then he died.

[16:11] Recognize he modeled that behavior for him? Stephen's death was the first of many in the history of the church. And we'll learn of other martyrs in the coming weeks. Because countless thousands have died for Christ, still continue to die for Christ around the world over the years to the present day. So we may never, I don't know if you say thank God or not to this, but we may never experience martyrdom ourselves. That's reality. So let's take a few moments now to consider some of the benefits of persecution. Looking for shocked looks on people's faces. So if you have any, if any of us have really experienced much persecution related to our faith identity, related to being disciples of Jesus, right? Have you been mocked by friends or family? I have occasionally. I've never been thrown in jail for it. Certainly never killed for it. But I think persecution might not actually be a bad thing.

It might not actually be bad if we experience some persecution in our lives. Or at least face the possibility that it might happen. Ooh, maybe Pastor Kent got too much sun on his vacation. Did he hit his head in the shower before coming to church this morning? No, I did not. How could persecution ever be a good thing? That's probably our perspective, right? Especially living in the Western world.

So let's consider this perspective. In many ways, I believe our faith can be an afterthought, can become an afterthought. Following Jesus can become a secondary part of our lives. Begin to become a lesser part of our identity rather than our primary identity. I believe we can become passive about our faith.

Passive about cultivating an intentional relationship with Christ. Passive about what it actually means to live as disciples of Jesus. Is that fair? When we're not afraid of losing our lives or our faith, do we begin to take it less seriously? Does it begin to devalue those things for us? If we don't have to stand up for what our faith means or face any kind of persecution for what we believe, does our faith then get put on the backburners of our lives? What perspective do you have on your faith? What about priorities? With the sense of urgency being persecuted for our faith may bring, strengthening our relationship with Jesus through prayer and reading his word, we begin to tumble down our list of priorities, right? Does prayer tend to become last in your day?

[19:14] Do you spend, did you used to spend time when you were passionate about God reading his word every day? Is it now once a week? Recognizing the needs of people all around us, that may also begin to become lost in striving to meet our own needs or our own wants. When we have bills to pay, job tasks, health concerns, other things that demand our attention, I believe our faith and our calling as disciples can begin to take a backseat to things we perceive to be more important. Have you ever heard the expression, the tyranny of the urgent? I was thinking about that this week. This refers to the tendency for immediate and seemingly pressing matters to take precedent over more important long-term goals or tasks. Does the tyranny of what we perceive to be urgent in our lives take precedent over our faith, over seeking after God? In the case of our faith, when we lose focus on it and lose focus on seeking God first, less important things begin to take priority, effectively pushing God to the edges, or even worse, completely out of our lives. Rather than seeking God first, it can become easy, and you've heard me say this many times over the years, to turn to him last. Almost as an afterthought, right? We've talked about, I have these great plans for my life. Oh, right. Lord, what do you think of what I've got already ready to go? You think that's good? Okay, gold stamp it and we're good. Let's go.

So rather than seeking God first, we turn to him last. Other things receive our attention, our focus, sometimes even our love, when only God truly deserves all of those things. What about our passion?

When you think of the church in the Western world, would you use the word passion to describe it? Would people who know you, don't have to raise your hand, would people who know you well describe your faith, describe your pursuit of the things of God as being passionate? As we've been studying the book of Acts, I hope we've all been able to recognize the passion of the early church. So what happened?

Where did the passion go? I believe that in many ways we've grown complacent. Someone else will share their faith. I'm just going to sit back here. Someone else will care for that street person. That's icky. I don't want to do that. I'll listen to the Holy Spirit's prompting to speak up or step in next time. I promise I will. Friends, I believe we've forgotten that time is short. And somewhere along the way, I venture to say that we've all forgotten, at least to some extent, forgotten our passion. Do you remember when you were passionate about Jesus? Maybe it was when you were saved.

When you remember, when you can reflect on having nothing to lose, like the early followers of Christ Christ believed. That passion to serve, that passion to speak and act boldly in Christ's name, should naturally overflow from our lives. What about praise? I like sharing stories about conversations I've had with people or things that have happened to me. And the person who I'm about to share the story about is not here. They wouldn't care that I'm sharing this. So I had a conversation with a friend a few weeks ago. Somehow we came around to the subject of God's grace.

[23:07] And we were both deeply moved, actually to tears, as we talked about how amazingly, unfathomably, unworthy we both felt to be loved and forgiven by our Heavenly Father.

We felt so deeply grateful, so deeply grateful to Jesus for taking all of the weight of our sin, all the weight of our shame on his shoulders, for giving us a gift that we could never repay or hope to deserve, but one that was freely given out of his deep, deep and abiding love for us.

Friends, I am a wretch. There's another friend of mine says, who's also not here. I am a dirty, rotten sinner. I hope you can relate. And yet, amazing grace. The good news, ultimately nothing, maybe this will cause you stress, but we'll work through it together. Ultimately, nothing in our lives is within our control. I'm waiting for, or I'm waiting for, oh yeah, but I gotta, everybody gets nervous, right? Oh, what about my job? Not your problem. I had a friend of mine say to me at one point, it's not your problem. None of what you're worried about, and this is a Christian friend who's a counselor. He said, none of what you're saying causes you stress is your problem.

That's God's problem. And I said, that feels, and he said, blasphemous? And I said, yeah. And he said, read the Bible more. God promises you everything in response for nothing. Show him love, follow him, do what he asks you to do. He'll look after the rest. Friends, God has numbered our days.

God will order our steps. He will meet our needs if we ask him, and more importantly, if we let him. And Jesus has prepared a place for us. So as we've learned from the example of Stephen this morning, Jesus gave us such amazing gifts of forgiveness from our sin and unconditional love, just as we are.

[25 : 24] All he asked in return, I touched on it, trust him. Share the good news with everyone you meet, and be brave in knowing that no matter what the price may ultimately be in following him.

Loss of relationships, being mocked by strangers, or even friends and family, even possibly losing our own lives. We can lose it all and still gain far more than we can ever ask, we can ever hope for, we can ever deserve, or imagine. So I encourage each of us to start fresh.

And you may be thinking, well, how can I start fresh? I'm in my 70s. Every day is a new day. Start fresh. Surrender to Jesus and his call on our lives. Be reminded that while we may not face the kind of persecution that we learned about in the early church, that we continue to learn about in the early church, we can still reflect on it. Ask God to restore the correct perspective in our lives.

Help us to reorient our priorities to where they're supposed to be. Rekindle our passion. Fill us to overflowing with praise for who he has called us to be, and for how he has saved us, and for his plans to save the world. Amen.