

Stephen, the First Christian Martyr

Acts 6:8-7:1-60

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Last week we stopped in Acts 6:7, so we pick it up. Follow with me beginning in Acts 6:8. It says, "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. 9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing," or arguing or debating, "with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. 11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. 12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council," that is; the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, "And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: 14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place," they are referring to the temple, "and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. 15 And all that sat in the council," the Sanhedrin, "looking stedfastly on him, saw his face," that's Stephen's face, "as it had been the face of an angel." This is why I call Stephen the man with the angel face. Stephen's face is glowing with the anointing of God, in the very presence of God, in his life.

We saw in last week's study that the believers were growing and multiplying, and there arose a murmuring among the Grecian widows that felt they were being neglected in the distribution of the food. The church was taking care of widows. There were widows that were following Greek culture. They were Hebrews, but they were following Greek culture. They complained that they were being neglected, so the apostles said, "It's not right for us to leave the Word of God and to begin to serve tables, so we ask you to pick out seven men, full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, and the ability to take care of this problem; and we will give ourselves to the ministry of prayer and to the Word." The seven were chosen, (back up and I'll point that out to you in verse 5.) "... and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch." I pointed out that every one of these seven men are actually Greek by name. It's possible that they were following the hellenistic culture, these deacons, these men who were to serve. If you missed last week's message, by the way, go back and listen to the archived sermon. It's on the website. You can listen to it and catch up to us on Wednesday night.

Beginning in Acts 6:8, we have Stephen. He is one of the seven mentioned in verse 5. Two deacons are going to be focused on. There is going to first be Stephen and then, as we get into chapter 8, Philip. Both of them actually became preachers. There's a lesson for us to learn right here, and it's important, they started off doing small things faithfully with a servant's heart as unto the Lord, and God raised them up. God gifted, called, and raised them up.

One of the questions I'm often asked, especially by young fellows that feel called to the ministry, is, "How did you get started in the ministry? How did you know you were called to be a

pastor?" My simple answer is, I just wanted to serve the Lord. I didn't have any aspirations or ambitions to be a pastor. That was the last thing on my agenda—to be a pastor. I did have a desire to just be used by God and to serve God, so I started doing every kind of thing I could do, menial, service, and task and just got busy serving the Lord. I found out that as God was leading me, He began to open the door for me to teach His Word. It was just kind of a natural progression. I found myself teaching the Bible, people coming to hear God's Word, and I kind of looked around and thought, I think that this is what God's calling me to do. That was actually 45 years ago that the Lord called me to do that. I'm still alive, and I'm still doing it. I don't know for how much longer, but by the grace of God I'll keep going for a while.

I was looking at some records that I had of teaching through the book of James, as we just started on Sunday morning, and it was 44 years ago that I first taught the book of James. It's been amazing to see what God has done. I always tell guys that you start, whether guy or gal, with just a servant's heart. You don't tell God what you're going to do for Him, you say, "God, what can I do for You? I'm available. Take my hands, my feet, my eyes, my mouth, take whatever You need, Lord, and use me for Your glory." Then, just get busy doing something for God. Don't just sit there waiting for Billy Graham to call and ask if you can fill in for him. "No, no, no, I don't do that. That's beneath me." Just do whatever God gives you to do. Roll up your sleeves and get busy serving the Lord, and I believe that God will lead us one step at a time.

Stephen is an amazing man. His name (I don't want to get too bogged down or slow down) means crown, "Stephanos." There are two words used for "crown" in the New Testament. There is the word "Stephanos," which actually conveys the idea of a victor's crown—you run a race and you get a crown. There is also "diadem," which is the king's crown. The crown that we're going to wear is going to be the "Stephanos," the victor's crown. We run the race, we win the prize, and we wear the crown. We're going to find tonight that the first to wear the martyr's crown (there is a crown for those that were martyred) is going to be "Stephanos" or Stephen. He fittingly has that name, "Stephanos" or crown; and he would be the first to wear the victor's crown.

Stephen was full of faith and power. By the way, my King James has faith, but a better rendering is he was full of grace and power. Full of dynamis, dynamic power. God began to use him to do wonders and miracles. He's busy waiting on tables. In the meantime, he's also preaching God's Word and God is using him. Some of the greatest preachers of church history have been laymen that God anointed and called and have been faithful as they were called by God to preach His Word.

"Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines." Jewish synagogues began in the intertestamental period between the books of Malachi and Matthew during what was called the 400 silent years. That's when synagogues started. A synagogue is basically a place wherever there were several male Jews, they would build a synagogue. It wasn't the temple. There was only one temple but multiple synagogues, and they were popular outside the promised land among the Jews of the diaspora, the scattered Jews, because they needed a place to congregate, to read the law, and to have instruction. We

have synagogues even today. They had a synagogue that was actually given over to the Libertines. That phrase “Libertines” means freed men. What it’s indicating is that these were Jews who attended this synagogue who had come from Rome and had previously been slaves. They were freed and are now back in the promised land. They had their own synagogue. You know, you have Jews that are Germans and Jews that are Polish and Jews that are from different parts of the world, so they kind of wanted to congregate together. These “Libertines” or these freed Jews gathered together and had their own synagogue.

There are actually five references to locations. It’s believed that these are five different synagogues, and it could be all of them were synagogues used by Jews that were hellenistic or followed the Greek culture. It mentions, “...Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia,” and they were in a debate or discussion with Stephen about the things of Messiah, the things of Jesus Christ. Verse 10, “And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.” Write down for a cross-reference Luke 21:15 because Jesus actually said to His disciples that He would give them wisdom and words to speak that no one would be able to resist. This is an answer to that promise that Jesus gave that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit, they would have wisdom and power, and it’s a fulfillment of what Jesus predicted would happen.

What they did was persuaded men that lied about Stephen. They brought false accusations against him and said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.” What we’re reading here is actually just setting the stage for his sermon which will begin in chapter 7. He will be brought before the council and give his defense, which is actually a long sermon. It’s, by the way, the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts. If you took all the sermons of Paul and rolled them together, they wouldn’t be as long as this one sermon that Stephen is going to preach. One of the accusations was that he’s speaking against Moses and God. So they, “stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,” the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, which was comprised of 70 of their leaders. Again, verse 13, it mentions a false witness, “...which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law.”

Here are the accusations. He’s speaking against Moses and God, primarily Moses, and against “this holy place,” which is the temple, and against the law. I point that out because when we go through Stephen’s sermon, he masterfully is going to answer their accusations; and his defense is going to become an indictment of the Jewish authorities—that they were actually guilty of rejecting God, Moses, God’s Word, and God’s judgment was going to come upon them. It’s important before you read Stephen’s sermon to know what the accusations were that were brought against him—against Moses, this holy place, and against the law.

Verse 14, “For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place,” this is the temple, “and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.” They’re probably alluding to what we read in John 2 where Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” They thought He was referring to the Jewish temple, but He was referring, John

makes it clear, to His body and His resurrection. Even with Jesus, they accused Him of saying He was going to destroy the temple. No, He was talking about them destroying His body. He said in John 2, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Verse 15, “And all that sat in the council,” now make a note right there. It’s very possible, we can’t be sure, but it’s a thought that Saul of Tarsus was a member of that supreme Jewish council. Saul was maybe beholding the face of Stephen, “...looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” It’s interesting because they accused him of speaking against Moses, right? (You’re supposed to say, “Yes,” okay? Some of you are starting to fall asleep already. We’ve got a long way to go.) Remember when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the law? What was up with his face? Remember that? His face was shining. He’d been talking to God, so he has the glow-face, you know. They had to put a veil over his face, not so much because it was glowing but because the book of Hebrews says, the fading glory of Moses—the face was going to fade—but he did have this glowing face. How cool is that, they’re accusing him of speaking of Moses, and God gives Stephen a Moses face right then. I think that’s pretty neat.

Acts 7:1, “Then said the high priest,” there’s no break between chapters 6 and 7. He says, “Are these things so?” Or, are they true? Or, how do you plead to these charges? Now, when you’re full of the Holy Spirit and you’re full of power, you don’t need much for an opener, right? Just a little crack in the door and you’ll jump right through it with both feet. “Glad that you asked! I’m ready to tell you,” and he begins to preach in verse 2. Now, I’m going to outline this sermon for you. He first starts talking about Abraham and God’s call of Abraham, verses 2-8. What he does in this sermon is answering the accusations by showing two things. First, the revelation of God always was, in the Old Testament, progressive and not confined to the temple. The revelation of God was always progressive, and we’ll see it unfold to these different patriarchs in the Old Testament, and it was outside the temple. It wasn’t confined to the temple, that they were so hung up on. Secondly, the messengers of God are always rejected at first and then many times it’s when they come back the second time that they are acknowledged and received.

What we have in Stephen’s sermon is a survey, a quick overview, of the Old Testament and of the history of the Jewish people. There are two key texts to the sermon, and I want you to peek at them. Just jump forward really quickly to verses 48 and 51 because I want to make sure you get them marked. In verse 48, Stephen says, “Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet.” Remember they accused him of speaking against the temple, so he says the prophets actually said that God doesn’t dwell in a temple made with hands. Jump down to verse 51. “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost,” and here’s the point, “as your fathers did, so do ye.” That’s what Stephen says in this sermon—God doesn’t dwell in a temple made with hands, and just like your fathers resisted the Holy Spirit, you also resist the Holy Spirit.

Stephen starts with God’s call of Abraham, and as God reveals Himself, He reveals Himself progressively first to a man, then to a family, then to a nation. Then, God would send the

Messiah, who would be the Savior of the world. Now, let's read beginning in verses 2-8. He said, "And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken," that's his introduction. "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, 3 And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. 4 Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. 5 And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child. 6 And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land," he's still referring to Abraham, "and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years." That's their Egyptian bondage, the 400-year bondage in Egypt.

Verse 7, "And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place. 8 And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs." Right off the bat they accused Stephen of speaking against the temple, and he points out that when God came and revealed Himself to Abraham, where was Abraham living? He was living in Ur of the Chaldees, a very pagan area which today would be modern Iraq or Iran in that area of the Mesopotamian valley, ancient Babylon, and he was living among pagans. This is the first and great time that God came to call Abraham, to set him aside, and to make promises with him. He's the father of the Jewish people. He's the first Jew, and before God called him, he wasn't really even a Jew. So, God called him from the pagan place of Ur of the Chaldees where they worshiped the sun and the moon and the stars. They were pagan, but the God of creation revealed Himself to Abraham. This is a clear picture of God's grace—His marvelous grace—in picking Abraham and revealing Himself unto him and making a covenant with him, the Abrahamic covenant, and promises unto him which involved the land and promised Seed who would be the Messiah. God first came and revealed Himself to this one man, but the point Stephen is making is that it was without the temple and was outside the land, so don't be so hung up on those things.

Then he begins to talk about Joseph. We love Joseph, the Old Testament character, verses 9-16. He reveals that Joseph came. They didn't recognize him as God's deliverer; they rejected him. They had a long history of rejecting God's promised deliverers. "And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him," so he's outside the land. He's not in the temple. He's not in the promised land, yet God was with him. "And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. 11 Now there came a dearth," famine, "over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13 And at the second time," now, I want you to note that. You might want to mark it. The second time, Joseph very clearly here becomes a picture of Jesus, who came the first time and they rejected Him. When He comes the second time, they will recognize Him and receive Him.

Verse 13, "And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh. 14 Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls," or 75 souls. First to a man, Abraham; now to a family, that would be the patriarchs. Verse 15, "So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers, 16 And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor [the father] of Sychem." God called Joseph. He was rejected by his family, but then when they came during the time of famine, they saw that Joseph was their deliverer, savior, and sustainer. Again, the history of them rejecting those whom God does send.

Now he moves to the real heart of the issue—Moses. They accused him of speaking against Moses, so Stephen is saying, "Let's talk about Moses," verses 17-40. "But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham," this is all still Stephen's sermon, "the people grew and multiplied in Egypt," they became a nation in Egypt—one man, then a family, and now a nation. They grew to over a million people during their 400 years in Egypt. Until Joseph died, "Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph. 19 The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live. 20 In which time Moses..." remember they said he was speaking against Moses, "...was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months..." just looking at the baby Moses, I don't know what it was, it would've been so awesome to actually have been there and look on Moses because the Bible actually indicates this baby was so awesome that just by looking at him you could tell God had a plan for him. Kind of like when grandparents look at their grand babies.

My wife's always talking about how cute our new grandson is. "Oh, he's so awesome! Oh, he's so awesome!" "Yeah, yeah, okay." I mean, they just looked at him and thought, God's hand is on this child. God is going to use this child. Jochebed knew that God had a purpose and a plan for this little child Moses. "And when he was cast out," his name is Moses because "Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son." Remember his mother made a little basket, lined it with pitch, put it on the Nile River, and put him in the hands of God. Pharaoh's daughter went to bathe and heard the baby cry and got the basket. She opened it up, and it was a Hebrew child. You know, God has got ways beyond our ways. God's plans and God's timing and God's program is just amazing! This is all a part of the sovereign hand of God. His name literally means "drawn out." That's what the name Moses means because Pharaoh's daughter drew him out of the Nile.

Verse 22, "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds," which is interesting because he became the human author of the first five books of the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch. God had Moses go to the home of Pharaoh so he could be taught to write and would become very learned. He would get a formal education so that he could be used to write the first five books of the Bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy. God had a plan for this little child. It says in verse 23, "And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel." The life of Moses can be put into three 40-year periods. This is a survey of his life. The first 40 years, he's forty years old when God

first put it in his heart to go down to visit the slaves of the Jews in Egypt; and he was actually living in the palace of Pharaoh.

“And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian,” Moses actually killed this Egyptian. “For he supposed his brethren,” catch this, verse 25, “would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.” Do you see where Stephen’s going here? Stephen is telling these Jews...and by the way, the fact that Stephen, instead of saying, “Jesus is the Messiah,” and “You guys need to believe in Him. You need to repent and get saved.” They wouldn’t have listen to him, but the fact that he started with their Old Testament history, he grabbed their attention. So far, they’re listening, “Yeah, this is not bad. This is good stuff.” Slowly, it becomes clear to them that Stephen is indicting them for their rejection of God’s deliverers. He’s actually inferring that as your fathers did so do ye. You’re stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. He applies that at the end of the sermon, but it says that Moses, verse 25, “For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.” That’s kind of like their m.o. They just don’t understand what God is doing.

Verse 26, “And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?” He sees these two Jews that were fighting among themselves the next day after murdering the Egyptian. He says, “What are you guys doing? You’re brothers, you shouldn’t be fighting.” “But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away,” Moses away, note that, rejected Moses, “saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?” God called Moses at 40, and in kind of his own energy he tried to deliver God’s people and failed, and they rejected him. This Jew said, “Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday? 29 Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons. 30 And when forty years were expired,” here’s the second 40-year period. Moses is now 80 years of age. “...there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.” Remember Moses fled out into the wilderness. He is now 80 years old watching sheep and ready to retire. It sounds kind of good to me. Just out in the starry wilderness watching sheep. Baa baaa baa. He’d have a crackling fire at night, you know, just camping out there. And he sees a bush burning and approaches it, “When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him, 32 Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold. 33 Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.”

I want you to notice verse 34. “I have seen,” the Lord said, “I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.” Moses is rejected. He flees into the wilderness of Midian. He’s watching sheep. He figures his life is over. He thought that he was the one God had called to deliver the people of Israel, but he thought, I failed. He’s 80 years old, and God comes to him through this burning bush. You know the story from the Old Testament. He takes

his shoes off. God speaks through this burning bush, and He calls Moses to go to Egypt and command that Pharaoh release his people. Notice in Stephen's sermon, he records that God said, "I have seen the affliction of my people...I have heard their groaning, and am come down," I believe the same is true today in our lives—God sees our affliction, He hears our cries, and He comes down to deliver us. Amen? God hears us, God sees us, and God comes to deliver us. Then He says, "I will send thee into Egypt." Of course, there is a lot of detail about Moses that is missing in the story. You can go to the Old Testament and fill in.

Verse 35, "This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush." The second time Moses came back. Remember Joseph was understood and accepted the second time? Here we have Moses when he came back, then he would be recognized and received as their deliverer. "He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years." Here's the third 40-year period. Forty years in the desert watching sheep, and the next 40 years in the wilderness going round and round and round and round with God's people, a bunch of complaining, griping sheep. I'm sure Moses thought, I want to go back to my real sheep because they don't complain or gripe. They go Baaa, but they don't complain anymore. Now Moses is 120 years old. That ought to encourage you if you think that God hasn't called you and you're getting old and you can't be used. There's hope for you and me. God called Moses when he was 80? Wow! And Moses was used by God up to 120—that's amazing to me! Now, he wouldn't take them into the Promised Land but would take them right up to the border. Joshua would take them into the Promised Land, but not Moses. Again, this is kind of a survey that shows that they have a history of rejecting God's promised deliverer.

Notice verse 37, "This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear." That's quoting Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses actually spoke about the Messiah, the Savior. It's a reference to Jesus. He doesn't use His name, but it's clearly a message about Jesus, "...him shall ye hear." They are saying Stephen is speaking against Moses; no, Moses spoke about Jesus and Him is the One we should trust in, look to, and listen. "This is he, that was in the church," assembly is a better translation. It's not what we know as the New Testament church, it's the assembly of the people of God in the Old Testament, "in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: 39 To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt." Notice, again, that they would not follow. They rejected Moses' leadership and went back to Egypt.

Verse 40, "Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him." When God gave Moses the law on Sinai and he tarried up on the mountain, the people of God got impatient. "We don't know where Moses is." They turned to Aaron and said, "Make us some gods that can lead us." They made this golden calf, and they threw their clothes off and were all dancing around it. When Moses came down from the mountain and saw them in this kind of debauched, pagan,

idolatrous worship, he broke the law of God. This is the end of the description of Moses, and he's winding down to the end of his sermon. He speaks now in general terms of Israel's apostasy and idolatry.

Verse 41, "And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. 42 Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?" He's quoting from the prophet Amos 5:25. "Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon. 44 Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness," the tent, "as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. 45 Which also our fathers that came after brought in with..." not Jesus but Joshua, referring to Joshua who would lead them into the Promised Land. Jesus is the equivalent in the New Testament; in the Old Testament it is Joshua. "...into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David; 46 Who found favour before God," referring to David, "and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built him an house." Now, he's winding down, and he's going to make the application about the temple.

"Solomon built him an house," here's the point, "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet," he's quoting from Isaiah 66:1-2. Even the prophet Isaiah said God doesn't dwell in a temple made with hands. God does not live in this building. We may call this God's house, but it's not really God's house. When we leave here tonight God doesn't say, "Goodbye. See you guys later. Come see Me on Sunday, okay? There's three services Sunday morning, come see Me again." The heavens can't contain God. God is what we call omnipresent. He's everywhere. There's no place in the entire universe where God does not exist. Psalm 139, "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea," If I take off at the speed of light and go as far as I can, there's God. "If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." You can't get away from God. You can't run from God. He certainly doesn't dwell in some temple that they are all hung up over.

Verse 49, "Heaven is my throne," he's quoting from Isaiah, "and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? 50 Hath not my hand made all these things?" Now he applies the sermon. This is the sermon's application and conclusion. Every good sermon should have an application and conclusion. "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." This did not make them happy. This is not a feel good, God loves you, you're okay, I'm okay, be happy, be blessed, have a prosperous week. I mean, he really laid it on them.

You know, the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We don't like preaching like this anymore today. We want preaching that's kind of happy and positive. I like that too. I like preaching sermons like that. I wish I could preach those kind of sermons every Sunday. My job is to preach the Word of God, so whatever the Bible says I'm supposed

to say. I'm not supposed to dictate what I'm supposed to say, I just say what the Bible says. There are times that God speaks very forcefully and sternly. God speaks about His judgment, and He speaks very, very sternly to these people. They are "stiffnecked." They weren't circumcised in their hearts and in their ears. They did always resist the Holy Spirit as their fathers did. He just gave them the history. Just like your fathers rejected Joseph, just like they rejected Moses, so do you.

By the way, just a little footnote there, the Holy Spirit can be resisted. There are some that teach that the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted. It's called the irresistible grace of God, that you can't resist God's grace. If God is going to save you, you're going to get saved whether you like it or not. The Bible teaches that, I believe, we have the ability to say no to God, to resist His will. It's called irresistible grace is the term that I was looking for. It's called irresistible grace. I believe that God's grace is resistible, that you can harden your heart, you can say no to God, and you can choose not to repent and not to believe. That's what they were doing. They were hardening their hearts against the Holy Spirit.

Then Stephen says, "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it." You've rejected the Just One, and by the way, nowhere in Stephen's sermon does he use the name Jesus. He spoke of Moses who would speak of the Prophet who would come, and now he calls Him the Just One. He doesn't really name Him as Jesus, but that's who he is referring to. "...of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers," he indicts them as being the ones that killed God's Messiah. In verse 54, Stephen is now martyred. "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart," he was speaking and the spirit of God convicted them, and they were cut to their heart, "and they gnashed on him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and," notice this, "Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, 58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." Take note of that. This is the first mention of Saul, who would become Paul the apostle.

Verse 59, "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Just one more quick verse. You say, "You're going to read one more verse?" I'm going to read one more verse. Acts 8:1, "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles." We'll go back over some of this in conclusion, next week, but Stephen is the first Christian to be martyred. "...and they were cut to the heart...But he," Stephen, "being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up...and saw the glory of God," this is that classic example story where he saw Jesus. He's going to be martyred. He's going to be stoned, and

Jesus gives him martyr's grace.

I believe whatever God calls you to go through, God gives you the strength and the ability to endure it. Peter talked about suffering and said, "...for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." You think, I don't know if I could die for my faith. If God calls you to die for your faith, He'll give you the grace and the strength to die for your faith. The martyr, John Huss, was in prison awaiting to be executed, and he had a little candle in his prison cell. He knew he was going to be burned at the stake the next day. As he was in his room praying, "Oh, God. I don't think I can endure the flames. I'm afraid that I'll recant or turn." He was actually running his finger up to the flame to see what it would feel like. He kept recoiling in pain, "Oh, God, help me." The next day when he went to die for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, God gave him the grace and the strength to endure it. He was strapped to the pole. They lit the wood and flames leaping up, he just began to sing praises and worship God as he died for his faith. I believe that God comes to you and meets you in that hour of need.

Stephen encountered God like never before, and the heavens actually opened up. He saw Jesus, and Jesus is always referred to in the Bible as being seated at the right hand of God the Father—not here, He's standing up. You can't help but think that He's standing to welcome home the first martyr. He's actually standing in honor of Stephen who is being welcomed home to Him. Can you imagine looking up and seeing the heavens open and Jesus standing next to the Father in heaven, and He's reaching out His hands for you? It's like, you're talking awesome! Then, Stephen begins to pray, and he prays, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he said, "Lay not this sin to their charge." He prayed like Jesus. He prayed just like his Master.

Remember when Jesus was on the cross and said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." When Jesus was being mocked and ridiculed on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." He was filled with Jesus, he was given the strength by Jesus, and he prayed like Jesus. What an awesome thing that is! By the way, this is a rare situation in the Bible where someone prays directly to the second member of the Godhead, directly to Jesus, crying out, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit. Lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Jesus is referred to as the Son of man in verse 56. It's the last time in the New Testament that title is ever used for Jesus. It's taken from Daniel 7. It's the only time in the Bible that it appears when it's not being used, other than the Old Testament, and the only time outside the gospel is here in the New Testament, by Jesus about Himself, referring to Him being the Messiah, the Son of man.

What happened to Stephen when he died? Where did Stephen go? He went to heaven. Do you think it's a trick question and you don't want to answer? You know what? To this day, it's one of the most common questions I get, even though the Bible is so clear. Do you know what the most common question is? Where do we go when we die? Where does a Christian go when they die? In 2 Corinthians 5 says, "...to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." See? You know that. It's no trick question. To be absent from the body is to be

present with the Lord. He fell asleep. When a Christian dies, the Bible uses this metaphor for a Christian's death. They say, "They just went to sleep. They just lay down and went to sleep." It's only referring to Christians, and it's only used about the body. The soul is never referred to as sleeping. Do you know why? Because one day your body is going to be resurrected. It's called the great gettin' up morning—the resurrection morning.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul was writing to Christians who were sorrowing because their Christian friends had died and the Lord hadn't come back yet. They thought they were going to miss heaven, miss the rapture, and miss all those good things. "Oh, don't die! The Lord hasn't come back yet." Paul said, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Amen? That's the blessed hope of the believer.

Now, there are a lot of lessons to learn from Stephen in his death, but I've got to wrap this up. We'll go back over it next week. God was going to use it to start a fire. Believers were going to be going out and finally taking the good news out. Persecution is going to start. Saul is going to make havoc of the Church. He's going to be throwing Christians in jail and killing them, but as a result of Stephen's death, I believe Saul came under conviction. He heard the message. He saw his face. He heard him pray, and when Stephen prayed this prayer, "Lay not this sin to their charge," could it be that God answered that prayer in saving Saul of Tarsus? It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. That God would actually use his death to bring Saul's conversion and start a revival, and the believers would go out and they would go everywhere preaching the gospel.

You know, satan will do all he can to try to stop the Church, but Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Amen? Let's be bold. Let's be courageous. Let's not worry. I mean, we're not worried about being stoned in downtown Temecula if we share the gospel, and we're so sheepish. Let's be bold. Let's be courageous. I believe that God came to Stephen, and met him, and gave him grace to endure that horrible, horrible way of dying—stoning.