

# 11. Stephen the first martyr

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Have you ever wondered about the difference between Christian martyrs and Islam homicide bombers? Did you notice that I didn't use the word 'suicide', rather 'homicide'? That is exactly what Islam homicide bombers do. They have a choice whether die or not to die. But they choose to kill themselves and murder others in the process.

However Christian martyrs have no choice in the matter. They get murdered by those who oppose and hate their faith in Jesus Christ. Some would insist that Christians do have a choice – they can deny their faith and save their lives. But for the love for Christ and their fellow believers they do not deny their faith in Jesus and give their life without harming anyone else. They are a true martyr.

What does it take for a man or woman to die willingly for Someone whom they 've never met but believe in Him so much that one's life is not valuable to hold back? Have you ever thought about that?

What does God think about those who are willing to die for Him?

*Psalm 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His saints.*

This morning we are going to witness the true dedication and martyrdom of Stephen, the first martyr of Christianity. The emphasis in Stephen's life is on fullness: full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, full of faith, and full of power. In Scripture, to be "full of" means "to be controlled by."

## A. ANOTHER FALSE ACCUSATIONS

*Acts 6:8-15 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.*

These Jewish religious rulers and their cohorts were becoming the experts in concocting false charges. They certainly had a good practice on Jesus.

Since these men from the "Synagogue of the Freedmen" could not compete with Stephen's wisdom and power, they decided that they were going to get rid of Stephen altogether. Nice people, aren't they?

The Jews were jealous over their Mosaic Law and they were proud of their temple and refused to believe that God would permit it to be destroyed. The first century church faced the opposition of Jewish tradition for many years to come, from within its own ranks and from false teachers coming in from the outside.

In v15 we see the phrase “saw his face as the face of an angel”. What does it mean? Does it mean that all of a sudden Stephen’s face became a face of a fat chubby cheek baby angel as we often see in so many paintings? I believe that it was a glow – the same kind of glow that Moses had when he spent his time with the Lord in the tabernacle. He had to put a veil over his face until he went back into the tabernacle.

How did Moses and Stephen get to have this glow on their faces? I believe that it comes from the peace, trust, and faith in the Lord. When you have the peace of God that passes all understanding and it guards your heart from all the difficult circumstances. The situations may not have changed at all. But your heart will acknowledge and trust the power and the faithfulness of God. Then the peace of God that is in your heart will be reflected onto your faces.

Do you know what the people around you who see your difficult situation would say? They will ask you, “You have such a special peaceful expression on your face. It’s like a glow on you.”

Listen, you will never have that glow unless you have the peace of God; you will never have that peace of God unless you have the faith in God.

## **B. STEPHEN THE WITNESS**

From v1 to v50, Stephen makes the longest address in the Book of Acts. In it, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and the contributions made by their revered leaders: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon.

But this speech was more than a recitation of familiar facts; it was also a refutation of their indictments against Stephen and a revelation of their own national sins. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those false charges they had accused him of committing.

Stephen’s address opens with “the God of glory” and closes with the glory of God in v55. Israel was the only nation privileged to have the glory of God as a part of its inheritance. But the glory of God had departed, first from the tabernacle in 1 Samuel 4 and then from Solomon’s temple according to Ezekiel 10. God’s glory had come in His Son Jesus, but the nation had rejected Him.

Here are Stephen’s five indictments against them:

### **1) Misunderstanding their own spiritual roots – v1-8**

In v1 through 8, Stephen talks about Abraham and his faith in God. The Jews greatly revered Abraham and prided themselves in being his “children.” But they confused physical descent with spiritual experience and depended on their national heritage rather than their personal faith.

Another thing the Jews prided themselves was their circumcision, but they failed to understand that the physical evidence was nothing more than a symbol of an inner spiritual relationship with God.

### **2) Rejecting God-sent messengers – v9-36**

In this section, Stephen points out two heroes of Israel – Joseph and Moses. He tells the Jewish religious rulers how these two men were rejected as deliverers the first time, but were accepted the second time.

These two events illustrate how Israel treated Jesus Christ. Israel rejected their Messiah when He came to them the first time, but when He comes again, they will recognize Him and receive Him.

*Zechariah 12:10 "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.*

In spite of what they did to His Son, God has not cast away His people. Israel today is suffering from a partial spiritual blindness that one day will be taken away .

### **3) Disobeying God's Law – v37-43**

*Acts 7:42 Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: 'Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?*

The Jews had worshiped idols in Egypt, and after their settlement in the Promised Land they gradually adopted the gods of the pagan nations around them. God repeatedly disciplined His people and sent them prophets to warn them, until finally He allowed them to be carried off to Babylon as slaves where they were finally cured of idolatry.

This verse should be compared with Romans 1:24-28, because all of these verses describe the judgment of God when He "takes His hands off " and permits sinners to have their own way.

*Romans 1:24-28 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. 27 Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. 28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;*

Do you know that there are people who call themselves Christians and hate this portion of the Scriptures, because it reveals the depravity and tragic final outcome of homosexuality? They can deny the truth all they want, but it doesn't change the truth at all.

### **4) Despising their temple – v44-50**

One of the false accusations by the so-called witnesses was that Stephen was seeking to destroy the temple, but in reality that was exactly what the Jewish nation did.

Moses built the tabernacle and God's glory graciously dwelt in the holy of holies; Solomon built the temple, and once again God's glory came in according to 1 Kings 8. But over the years, the worship at the temple degenerated into mere religious formality, and eventually there were idols placed in the temple. Jeremiah warned people against their superstitious faith in the temple and told them that they had turned God's house into a den of thieves in Jeremiah 7.

### **5) Resisting the Holy Spirit – v51-53**

*Acts 7:51-53 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the*

*prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."*

I am sure that Stephen could see the members of the Sanhedrin were fuming over the history lesson that pointed out that they were the guilty ones. This is the climax of his speech. Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and did not obey His truth He had revealed to them. Their hearts and ears were hardened and their necks would not bow to the truth and the Messiah Jesus. Almost 20 times in the Old Testament, God calls Israel "stiff-necked." These religious leaders were acting just as their forefathers acted.

As I teach the Word of God, I can see your facial expressions. Some of you have that constant hunger for the Word of God. You cannot have enough of it and you long for more of God's presence in your lives and you are obedient to Him in everything you do. Then, I see the second type of facial expression: the ones who like to be in the church to appease one's religious desire, but they don't want to obey God's Word in every way, because it goes against their carnal ways. The third group of facial expression is "I-don't-care-what-God-says." You were dragged here. As soon as I finish the teaching, you bolt out the door because you don't like what you heard. You've hardened your heart and are resisting the Holy Spirit. Before it becomes too late to change, you need to hear from the Lord and obey:

*Hebrews 3:7-8a Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion*

### **C. STEPHEN THE MARTYR AND SAUL THE MURDERER**

*Acts 7:54-60 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Our Lord Jesus sat down at the right hand of God the Father when He ascended to heaven, but He stood up to welcome the first Christian martyr to heaven. What an honor for Stephen!

Stephen was not only tried in a manner similar to that of our Lord, but he also died with similar prayers on his lips.

For Israel, Stephen's death meant condemnation; for the church in Jerusalem, it was a green light to take the message of Jesus out of Jerusalem to Samaria and to the Gentiles. For Saul of Tarsus who gave his approval to the illegal execution of Stephen, it meant his salvation. Stephen's speech, prayer, and his glorious death haunted him until he came to Jesus face to face.

For some of you, you have to make a very serious choice this morning. You may say, "I am willing to die for Christ." If you are not willing to live for Christ by obeying

what He teaches us in the Bible, what makes you think that you are willing to die for Him when you are threatened to choose between your faith in Christ and life?

#### **D. APPLICATION**

**God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be “ living sacrifices”.**

In some respects, it may be harder to live for Christ than to die for Him; but if we are living for Him, we will be prepared to die for Him if that is what God calls us to do.

*Revelation 2:10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer . Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*