

*<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.* Acts 7:54 What caused the ruling council, also known as the Sanhedrin, to become so angry? Stephen was asked if the accusation of him blaspheming Moses and the law was true, and was he teaching that Jesus would destroy the temple. We saw how in some ways they may have perceived his message in that way. Moses foreshadowed Jesus' role as ruler and redeemer and predicted a prophet like him was coming (Deuteronomy 18:15). The law was fulfilled in Jesus, and Gentiles converts to Christianity would not be told obey the dietary and worship laws of the Jews. Jesus did predict the destruction of the temple, but He never said He was the one who would do it (Matthew 24:2). False witnesses had twisted the words of Stephen.

Stephen's response was one of the longest sermons recorded in the Bible. It summarized the history of the Jews from Abraham through Moses. He showed how their forefathers had often resisted the Spirit of God and God's ordained leaders. He concluded with these convicting words, <sup>51</sup> *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.* <sup>52</sup> *Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,* <sup>53</sup> *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."* Acts 7:51-53 Stephen was telling them that it was happening all over again. They were acting just like their forefathers, but now had done something even worse, for they killed their own long awaited Messiah, the Righteous One, whom Isaiah predicted would die for our sins (Isaiah 53:11; 24:16a; 57:1-4).

On hearing Stephen's defense, they had a choice. They could consider the truth of what he was saying and repent, or they could act according to the very nature Stephen described. Without hesitation they chose the latter, the same nature in them that led to the execution of Jesus. Jesus had warned His disciples that the world would treat us like they treated Him (John 15:20).

We must realize that the hatred against followers of Christ is because there is a spiritual war. People are for Jesus or they are against Him (Matthew 12:30). In our present culture, I have to clarify that I am speaking of the Biblical Jesus. Those who say they believe in Jesus but deny the Bible is an accurate account of His life will find no disagreement with the world. But if you stand for the Biblical Jesus, there is a strange animosity that you will find against no other faith except Judaism. Some claim that is because of the exclusivity of Christianity claiming to be the only way (John 14:6). However, most major religions claim an exclusive hold on the truth and the answer to our existence. If it is not exclusivity and our second great command is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), then the only answer to this animosity towards us is the spiritual battle that is taking place over the souls of mankind (Ephesians 6:12).

Seventy-five percent of the world lives under severe religious restrictions. 215 million Christians in fifty countries live under daily threat of extreme persecution. Even in

**Commented [PW1]: Deuteronomy 18:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—

**Commented [PW2]: Matthew 24:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

**Commented [PW3]: Isaiah 53:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

**Commented [PW4]: Isaiah 24:16a (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One.

**Commented [PW5]: Isaiah 57:1-4 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart; devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity;

<sup>2</sup> he enters into peace; they rest in their beds who walk in their uprightness.

<sup>3</sup> But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman.

<sup>4</sup> Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit,

**Commented [PW6]: John 15:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

**Commented [PW7]: Matthew 12:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup> Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

**Commented [PW8]: John 14:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

**Commented [PW9]: Matthew 22:39 (ESV)**

<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

**Commented [PW10]: Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Chiapas, Mexico 150 Protestants were forced to leave their community as their homes and land were taken from them. Twenty-three people were martyred by drug cartels solely because of their Christian faith. In Germany, eighty-eight percent of Christians in refugee camps say they experience extreme persecution and threats on their lives. In the U.K., converts from Islam have armed police protection. In many Muslim nations, blasphemy laws are used to persecute Christians. In Pakistan, Asia Bibi has languished in a prison for seven years because someone said she spoke against Mohamed. The only good news regarding persecution against Christians is that the annual rate of martyrdom sharply declined after several years of record numbers.

In the latest issue of Voice of the Martyrs, it was announced that a frontline worker in Somalia had been martyred. Years earlier, Abdi had turned from Islam to Christianity. Al-Shabab discovered his conversion and dragged him away to an underground cell. They tortured and beat him to get him to give up the names of other Christians. Abdi wouldn't give them up. Weeks later, he miraculously escaped and for several more years he witnessed for Christ in Somalia. His legacy lives on in several other Somali men whom he led to Christ.

In another article, Mahad was an imam from the age of nine because of his ability to read and write and memorize the Koran. His favorite Friday sermons to preach were on hating Christians. One day at a tea house he met a man who said he was a Christian. "Damn you," he snapped at him, "tell me what you believe about Jesus!" The Christian missionary gave him a Bible. At the age of twelve he began to read the Gospel of Matthew. When he came to **Matthew 11:28** which reads, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," he realized he was lost and needed a savior. He saw the difference between works and grace and accepted Christ. His family kicked him out of the house. Eventually he found other underground believers. Somali secret police caught and detained him six times in two years for sharing his faith. He was tortured to try to break him. Each time Christian officials were able to secure his release.

He returned to Kenya and began working with missionaries through a basketball outreach program. Within a year, sixteen Somali Muslim men converted to Christianity. He started a small church but was discovered and beaten again, breaking both his hands. Three different times he was beaten and left for dead. One time a gang held a knife to his throat and demanded he recant and turn back to Islam. His neighbor, a policeman, was able to rescue him. A Molotov cocktail was thrown through his window but landed in a barrel of water and did not explode. He says, "Through all these troubles, I have increasingly experienced the presence of God. Persecution and the grace of God can go together." (**Romans 5:20**) Recently he helped produce the Somali audio Bible. There is a fatwa offering hundreds of thousands of dollars for his death. He moves each month to a new apartment for security reasons and continues his pastoral work. Life for him remains very difficult, but he says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (**Philippians 1:21**). His hope rests in eternity with Christ.

**Commented [PW11]: Matthew 11:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

**Commented [PW12]: Romans 5:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

**Commented [PW13]: Philippians 1:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

These men and women belong to a group of hundreds of thousands if not millions of Christian martyrs (Revelation 6:9) who began with the man whose story we are reading about this morning. After the council displayed their raging anger, Stephen must have known he would shortly stand before His Savior. <sup>55</sup> *But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* <sup>56</sup> *And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* Acts 7:55-56

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God until His enemies are made His footstool (Psalm 110:1). However, Jesus stands to greet those who give their lives for Him. God gave Stephen a vision of where He was headed, to the presence of the glory of God and the arms of Jesus. An abundance of supernatural grace came upon him to endure what was about to happen. He couldn't help but to declare what he was seeing. I am reminded of Joseph sharing his dreams with his brothers (Genesis 37:5). It didn't seem like the wisest thing to do, but sometimes you are so overwhelmed by the love of God that you just say it without thinking how others will receive it. His declaration of seeing Jesus only enflamed the councils' rage even further. It confirmed what Jesus had said when they decided He must be crucified (Matthew 26:64), that He would be seated at the right hand of Power. The council could not abide the thought of the carpenter from Nazareth at the helm of the universe.

<sup>57</sup> *But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.* Acts 7:57 That was unhinged rage. This isn't simply, "We don't agree with you and have a different interpretation and want you to stop influencing others." This is bloodlust. They want him dead at once. Notice that they cried with a loud voice and stopped their ears. It sounds like they were screaming while putting their hands over their ears. When the truth is proclaimed, people with hardened hearts will do anything to get away from it.

I was sharing with a man who had an interest in Jesus as one of the ascended masters (New Age/Buddhist thought). I was sharing with him about the promise of Jesus returning to rule and showing him an early printing of the text from Revelation. He insisted that the Bible had been translated so many times that the meaning had been lost. I went on to tell him that this particular English manuscript was translated directly from the original language. He said, "No it wasn't!" I told him there was no question. It was historical fact. He turned and almost ran away. He knew what he believed and didn't want to be confused with the facts.

We must be careful to always be open to the facts, the truth of the Word, and clear, unquestionable evidence. Our biases can get in our way of understanding the truth. Another man I witnessed to liked the idea of grace and the free gift of salvation, but he didn't like what the Bible said about a particular sin in his life. He didn't run away screaming though. Conviction is God's tool to break through spiritual defiance.

<sup>58</sup> *Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.* Acts 7:58 While the council did not

**Commented [PW14]: Revelation 6:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

**Commented [PW15]: Psalm 110:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

**Commented [PW16]: Genesis 37:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.

**Commented [PW17]: Matthew 26:64 (ESV)**

<sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

have the legal ability under Rome to stone Stephen, they risked the consequences because they were in such a rage. Their cloaks would get in the way of freely hurling rocks, so they took off those outer cloaks and a man named Saul was trusted to watch over them. This is our introduction to Saul who later became Paul. He is a disciple of Gamaliel and one of the up and coming Jewish leaders. He wanted to see what he believed was a distortion of true faith wiped out. He was no doubt one of those who stopped his ears and ran at Stephen. But what happened next I don't think ever left the mind and conscience of Saul (Acts 22:20).

*<sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."  
<sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.* Acts 7:59-60 Stephen followed his Lord's example. He forgave them and committed his spirit into the hands of Jesus. Forgiveness is a powerful witness. The council members, who are supposedly representing the God whose most commonly mentioned attribute is love, are filled with rage and hurling rocks at Stephen (Psalm 36:5). Stephen was being executed for supposed blasphemy, yet he was asking God to forgive them.

Verse 55 said Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. When we are full of the Holy Spirit we forgive others. That is because we realize that we have been forgiven by the wonderful grace and mercy of God of much greater sins than those who offend or wound us (Matthew 6:14-15). Jesus told a parable to drive the point home in Matthew 18. One man owed an amount of money that was impossible to ever pay back. His master forgave him the debt. The debtor then saw a man who owed him a small sum. He had him thrown in prison until he could pay up. When the master heard about what the debtor had done, he decided he should not forgive the man after all, and did to him what he had done to the poor man (Matthew 18:32-34). We reap what we sow.

**Forgiveness frees us from self-torture.**

The other result of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is trusting God for our spirit. We do not need to fear death. The Lord is our keeper (Psalm 121:5). He keeps us from stumbling (Jude 24). He guards our lives (Psalm 121:7-8). And when it comes time for us to depart this temporal world to our eternal home, like Stephen in this passage, we can commit our spirits into his hands (2 Timothy 4:18).

What was the fruit from the martyrdom of Stephen? I think it played on the conscience of Saul. Remember that at Saul's conversion he asked, "Who are you Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5) Stephen was a member of the body of Christ. Jesus told Annanias that He would show Saul how many things he must suffer for His name's sake (Acts 9:16).

*<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.* Acts 8:1-3 This

**Commented [PW18]: Acts 22:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.'

**Commented [PW19]: Psalm 36:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

**Commented [PW20]: Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

**Commented [PW21]: Matthew 18:32-34 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

**Commented [PW22]: Psalm 121:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

**Commented [PW23]: Jude 1:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,

**Commented [PW24]: Psalm 121:7-8 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. <sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

**Commented [PW25]: 2 Timothy 4:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Commented [PW26]: Acts 9:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

**Commented [PW27]: Acts 9:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

was the turning of the tide to be against the followers of Jesus. Persecution forced them to obey the Great Commission. We see the determination of Saul to stop the spread of the Jesus' movement. He was sincere, but sincerely wrong. After his conversion he will write that what he did was done in ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13).

2 Timothy 3:12 tell us that all who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. In one form or another, standing for Christ will raise the ire of our spiritual foe and he will incite people to oppose us. It will seem unreasonable and unfair. That is because it is. But when it comes, Jesus said you should count it a great honor. Here are His words: <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:10-12 That sure isn't how the world thinks, but then, most of Jesus' teaching is different from the way the world thinks. A few verses before, Stephen said that there was hardly a prophet that their ancestors didn't persecute and kill (Acts 7:52). He was in great company. Realizing that we could be so honored to die for the One who died for us should cause us to rejoice and be glad.

We overcome evil and the evil one by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony, the Revelation tells us, for we love not our lives even unto death (Revelation 12:11). We certainly don't seek death like Muslim martyrs. Nor do we think we gain any merit by dying for Jesus. It is simply an honor to put Him first, even above something so dear as life itself.

Loving not our lives does not have to mean to die as a martyr. Dying daily should be the normal Christian life (1 Corinthians 15:31). We die to the old nature that we might live unto God (Galatians 5:24-25). We die to selfishness that we might show the unconditional love of Christ. It seems foolish, but it is wise. It seems costly, but by it we are more than repaid. Stephen died as the first Christian martyr because he died daily. We must die daily if we are to allow the life of Christ to live through us. If we do not, we stifle His life in us. When we do, we live in Him. That is real life! Some would say of earthly thrills, "That is livin'!" But it is only a short-lived pleasure. Some would say that the Christian life is boring, but it is eternal pleasure at God's right hand (Psalm 16:11)!

#### Questions

- 1 Why were the leaders furious?
- 2 What was the choice before them?
- 3 What is daily life for many Christians?
- 4 Tell the story of Abdi and Mahad.
- 5 What is significant about Stephen's vision?
- 6 How did the council respond?
- 7 Who was introduced to us as the stoning?
- 8 What were Stephen's last words and what should we learn from them?
- 9 What effect might this have had on Saul?
- 10 How should we respond to persecution?

#### Commented [PW28]: 1 Timothy 1:13 (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

#### Commented [PW29]: 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

#### Commented [PW30]: Acts 7:52 (ESV)

<sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,

#### Commented [PW31]: Revelation 12:11 (ESV)

<sup>11</sup> And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

#### Commented [PW32]: 1 Corinthians 15:31 (ESV)

<sup>31</sup> I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!

#### Commented [PW33]: Galatians 5:24-25 (ESV)

<sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

#### Commented [PW34]: Psalm 16:11 (ESV)

<sup>11</sup> You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.