

Martyrs Acts 7:51-60

I. INTRODUCTION

A. A Modern Martyr

1. Davou Bulle, his wife Mary, & their 10 children climbed into their beat up van after an exhausting day of work on their farm in Nigeria.
2. The van had just started down the dirt path leading to their home when gunshots hit the tires.
3. They were quickly surrounded by a band of radical Muslims intent on killing them as Christian infidels.
4. They took aim at Davou behind the wheel.
5. The eldest son dove in front of him, trying to intercept the bullets.
6. One got through & hit Davou who managed to stay alive long enough to drive the family to safety.
7. Davou died. His wife was hit in the eye but survived, as did the eldest son, who had 14 bullets removed from his body.
8. It's estimated between 10 & 20,000 Christians have been martyred by Muslims in Nigeria in the last 8 years.
9. Thousands of homes & churches have been destroyed.

B. A Long History of Martyrs

1. The Church has a long history of people who've died for the Faith.
2. And, the list of martyrs **grows**. It's estimated worldwide 465 are put to death each day for their Faith.
3. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* chronicles the stories of the past generations of martyrs,
 - a. You can read of **modern martyrs** on the internet.
 - b. When you read their stories, you realize they're just like us – normal people,
 - c. Just average followers of Jesus who one day found themselves facing the ultimate challenge.
4. In our study today, we'll take a look at Stephen, the **first martyr** of the Church.

II. TEXT

A. Setting The Scene

1. Last week we read about a problem that arose among the believers in Jerusalem.
 - a. Some of their needy widows weren't getting a fair share of the daily distribution to the poor.
 - b. Following the Apostles' counsel, the Church selected 7 men to take charge of the distribution.
 - c. One of them was **Stephen**, who's described as "full of faith & the power of the Spirit."
 - d. He was so faithful in his ministry to the poor, God **expanded** his outreach.
 - e. He began to work miracles & was given a powerful anointing to preach.
2. Several months have passed since the birth of the Church & it's grown **so large** & influential the authorities have become frantic.

- a. Threatening, arresting, & beating the Apostles hadn't worked.
 - b. All it did was cause them to *rejoice* for suffering for Christ.
 - c. When a large number of *priests*, men from their *own ranks*, defected to the Church, they realized they needed to *change tactics*.
 - d. Instead of just *forbidding* the Apostles preaching in Jesus' Name,
 - e. They decided to engage them in *debate*.
3. After all, the Apostles were mere country boys from the back hills of Galilee. They'd prove no match for the towering intellect of the rabbis of Jerusalem.
 4. At the end of ch. 6 we're told of a synagogue there in Jerusalem that took on the task of argument & debate with the followers of Jesus.
 - a. They were former slaves who'd become ultra-sharp intellectuals. They specialized in *apologetics* – in presenting a formal defense of the Jewish Faith.
 - b. They'd be the perfect group to use in opening this new round of conflict between the Church & the Rulers of Israel.
 - c. They tried out their debating tactic, not on one of the Apostles, but on *Stephen*.
 5. This would give the rabbis in the Sanhedrin an opportunity to see which arguments would be most effective when they went up against the Apostles later.
 6. So the battle began – but it was simply *no contest*. Stephen's reasoning & use of Scripture *completely shut them down*. It was embarrassing!
 7. Smarting badly from their defeat, they tried to salvage their wounded pride by accusing Stephen of *blasphemy*.
 8. They charged him of speaking against both the temple & the Law of Moses, saying Jesus would destroy them.
 9. This was a total distortion of Stephen's position, but it was a charge that required his arrest.
 10. Blasphemy was punishable by *death* so the entire Jewish Sanhedrin showed up for the trial.
 11. They realized if their new tactic of theological debate wasn't going to work – *this might!*
 12. By executing a Church leader, it would mark the movement as *heretical* – not just a splinter sect of Judaism.
 13. As the trial began, the Holy Spirit came upon Stephen. He preached a message that at first *riveted* the court to their seats.
 - a. It was a brilliant review of Jewish history, starting with Abraham.
 - b. As Stephen told the tale, he keyed on specific points that were usually downplayed because they weren't real complimentary.
 - c. *Why* he high-lighted these obscure points was at first unclear.
 - d. But the more of their history he told, the clearer his theme became.
 - e. Stephen showed how it had *always been* the tendency of the leaders of Israel to *resist* God.
 - f. As the generations passed that resistance *grew* until they *murdered* the prophets God sent them.
 - g. As Stephen moved to his conclusion, this theme of the *leaders' rejection of God* had become their most prominent characteristic – evidence by the fact

that when God Himself came in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, they crucified Him.

B. Vs. 51-53

⁵¹“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so do you. ⁵²Which 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, ⁵³who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*.”

1. If Stephen’s aim was to escape condemnation by the court, this wasn’t the way to go about it.
2. You don’t insult the judge if you want to go free.
3. But Stephen wasn’t concerned with escape. His concern was truth.
4. The Sanhedrin recognized this trial as crucial in settling Judaism’s relationship with the followers of Jesus
5. By the Spirit, Stephen recognized it was time to draw a line & call ***them*** to decide which side of that line they’d be part of; obeying God or resisting Him.
6. Stephen was an ambassador of Jesus Christ whom ***these very men had murdered***.
 - a. They’d ***accused*** Stephen of ***blaspheming*** the law.
 - b. He made it clear; they’d ***BROKEN*** it!
 - c. Which was worse? Obviously their sin was ***far*** worse.
 - d. Let me use an analogy . . .
 - 1) A judge murders an artist but gets away with it.
 - 2) A couple years later, he presides over the trial of a man accused of stealing one of that artist’s paintings.
 - 3) Whose crime is worse, the judge’s or the thief’s?
 - 4) Obviously, the judge’s crime is far worse, he murdered the artist!
 - e. Stephen was being tried for ***blaspheming*** the Law & temple, even though he was innocent of those charges.
 - f. But the men who were presiding at his trial were guilty of murdering the ***Giver*** of the Law & the ***Owner*** of the temple.
7. The Sanhedrin’s whole purpose was to represent God. But when He came as Man in the Person of Jesus, they killed Him.
8. All Stephen did was connect the dots that started with Abraham & ran down to that day.
 - a. The Jewish leaders had ***always*** opposed God. These guys were no different than their predecessors.
 - b. They were true sons of their fathers.
9. Now – how do you supposed the Sanhedrin took this? Not Well!

C. V. 54

⁵⁴When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.

1. The conviction of the Holy Spirit laid them bare.
2. They had a moment of total clarity where they realized what Stephen said was

right on.

3. They were guilty & there were only 2 ways to proceed from that point.
 - 1 – Repent & believe in Jesus.
 - 2 – Continue resisting & attack Stephen as the *perceived* cause of their spiritual pain.
4. This kind of crystal clear conviction is *painful*, & if it doesn't result in repentance, it nearly always leads to an attack on the one who's thought to be the *cause* of the torment.
5. In this case, that's Stephen, whom they fly into a violent rage against.
6. "Gnashing teeth" refers to that kind of anger that causes a person to roll their head around snapping & growling like an enraged animal.
7. So much for the cool headed dignity of these sophisticated men!

D. Vs. 55-56

⁵⁵But 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, ⁵⁶and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

1. In contrast to the howling maelstrom of the snarling Sanhedrin is Stephen who stands at perfect peace in the midst of them.
2. The Holy Spirit had empowered him when he began his speech.
3. Now that he's finished the Spirit once more fills him & lifts his vision off the enraged faces *before* him to the smiling face of God *above* him.
4. On the Father's right hand, in the place of favor & privilege, he sees Jesus – & He's *standing!*
5. How easy to miss the significance of that – but don't for it's a precious insight.
6. You see, just a few months earlier, Jesus had stood before these same men. His last words to them were -

"I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mat 26:64)

7. At that, the Sanhedrin had flown into a rage & ended Jesus' trial in a unanimous verdict of blasphemy.
8. Now, a few months later, standing in the same place Jesus had stood, is one of His followers saying he could see Jesus at the right hand of God.
9. It was a *nightmare* case of déjà vu for these guys.
10. The blessing is what Stephen **SAW**. Jesus was indeed at the Father's right hand – but He wasn't *seated*, He was *standing*.
 - a. That's unusual, because other passages referring to Jesus at the Father's right hand speak of Him as *seated*.
 - b. He sits because His work is *finished* - the sacrifice for sins is complete.
 - c. But Stephen sees Jesus standing because He's risen to *welcome* home the first martyr.

E. Vs. 57-60

⁵⁷Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸and 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. ⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then 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.

1. The Sanhedrin could endure no more.
2. It was one thing to be cut to the quick by conviction, but to know their rage *in no way intimidated* Stephen was too much!
3. How dare this guy who was as good as dead not give them the *satisfaction* of seeing the terror on his face! That only made them *more mad*.
4. They didn't want to hear Jesus' name one more time. But it was the only thing Stephen wanted to talk about – even though it was for that Name he was about to be killed.
5. So like bratty little kids they stuck their fingers in their ears & demanded Stephen be hauled off to death.
6. They carried him to one of the cliffs bordering the city, threw him off, then lifted stones overhead & let fly till a pile of them covered Stephen's body like a tomb.
7. Yet even with his *last breaths*, he held fast to his confession of Christ – echoing the Savior's last words = “Father, Into Your hands I commit my Spirit. Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
8. Here's a disciple who's just like his rabbi, all the way to the very end.

III. CONCLUSION

A. How to Die

1. There are several great lessons to glean from this passage.
 - a. I want to focus on just one of them as we end today.
 - b. It's this: Jesus has shown us not only *how to live* but *how to die*.
2. *Stephen* was able to go out with courage & faith because *that's the way he lived*.
3. There was no *disconnect* between his life & death.
4. Evil didn't get the best of him in death because he'd overcome it in life.
5. He *died well*, because he *lived well*.

B. Die Well

1. As a pastor, I'm called to lead, feed, & protect the flock of God.
2. We started CCO 25 years ago this September,
 - a. And I've had the privilege of being a part of many of your lives for a long time.
 - b. I've known many of your children since they were born.
 - c. I've watched them grow, go to school, graduate, get married, & start their own families..
 - d. And I've had the *difficult honor* of performing the funerals for some of our brothers & sisters who've gone home.
3. It's my aim to not only encourage & equip you to *live* well, but prepare you to *die* well too.
4. Let's face it—apart from the Rapture, we're all going to die.

- a. None of us get out of this alive.
 - b. Of course, for the believer, death has lost its sting because believers don't *really* die, we *graduate* from this life to glory.
 - c. But there does come a day when the body gives out & life on this earth ends.
 - d. That's an appointment we *all* have. We can't avoid it.
5. So - knowing we have an appointment with death, let's determine to *die well*.
 - a. Whether it comes through war, persecution, illness, age, or trauma,
 - b. Let's determine to depart this life, not looking at the circumstances but by keeping our eyes on heaven, as Stephen did.
 6. We can *die well* by *living will*.
 7. Stephen went out full of faith & power because he *lived* that way.
 8. *Our end will be* the sum of *all the days that come before*.