

Stephen, the First Christian Martyr**Lesson Scope:** Acts 6:8—8:2*References in brackets refer to Acts 6, 7 & 8 unless otherwise specified***Lesson Focus**

Stephen was one of the seven deacons ordained to serve tables (6: 1-6). Obviously, God's blessing and power were upon him for the additional mission of preaching.

Like Christ, Stephen had a short but successful ministry. Both were noted for performing wonders and miracles, and preaching with irresistible power. Both were accused of blasphemy by false witnesses and faced a mad crowd seeking their death. Both faced persecution victoriously and were given dying grace. Even if this is not our lot, we all need their example to remind us that grace can enable us to live righteously and endure whatever accusations or conflicts we may face for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus promised, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." Those who employ God's resources can faithfully endure even a martyr's death.

How often do we think about the possibility of dying for our faith in God? Our flesh shrinks from this, yet it could be a reality in our day. The peace and calm we enjoy today could quickly change. We have no promise of the government's continued approval of living out the Christian life.

The only way we can face the future without worry is with God's help. Daily fellowship with Him through reading His Word gives us that strength. Casual Christianity and a disdain for Scriptural church discipline is presently a greater threat to our spiritual life than persecution.

Lesson Aim: To present qualities that enable the believer to live or die for Christ.

Theme Verse: 1 Peter 4:14. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.

Lesson Text

A Powerful Ministry

Acts 6:8-10

⁸ (KJV) 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 with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

A Fraudulent Trial

Acts 6:11-15

¹¹ (KJV) 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, ¹³ 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, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. ¹⁵ And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1 ¹ (KJV) Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

A Pointed Defence

Acts 7:2

² (KJV) And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

Acts 7:51-56

⁵¹ (KJV) Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do* ye. ⁵² Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of 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*. ⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with *their* teeth. ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and 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.

A Noble Martyrdom

Acts 7:57-60

⁵⁷ (KJV) 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. 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.

Acts 8:1-2

¹ (KJV) 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. ² And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him.

Questions for Study

A Powerful Ministry

1. Contrast the wisdom and spirit of Stephen with the motivation of his opponents.
2. What signs of faith and power should be evident in our lives?

A Fraudulent Trial

3. What did the council see when they looked at Stephen?
4. How should we respond when falsely accused?

A Pointed Defence

5. What about Stephen's message required courage to share it?
6. When should we boldly speak out against sinners?
7. What is significant about Jesus standing on God's right hand?
When should we boldly speak out against sinners?

A Noble Martyrdom

8. Give some evidences of Stephen's calm trust and assurance.
9. How can we prepare to face criticism and injustices for being a Christian?

Analysing the Passage

The group that assembled to accuse Stephen included elders and scribes (6:9,12). These were religious Jews who should have realized by now that they could not stamp out this new Christian church.

Suborned (6:11) means “bribed a witness to give false testimony.”

Many of the accusations levelled against Stephen (6:11-14) were totally false. Others were intentional misrepresentations of his statements. From the accusations, we can conclude that Stephen was clearly teaching that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the Law and brought in the New Dispensation.

Although Stephen’s sermon touched on the accusations that were made against him, he did not give a legal defense of himself. Rather, he ‘set forth Israel’s history and God’s workings as he sought to vindicate Christianity.

Stephen charged the Jewish leaders with being “stiffnecked (obstinate) “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (having sinful hearts and selective hearing), and “betrayers and murderers” (they had killed Jesus).

Principles and Applications

A Powerful Ministry

1. Faith in God is vital to see Him at work in the details of life (6:8). Our faith helps us realize that God allows and controls the experiences we face. “For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8).

2. Knowledge of and wisdom from the Scriptures will enable the believer to endure (6:10). Jesus promised, “For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist” (Luke 21:15). God’s Word is an effective sword against the attacks of Satan. It is up to us to make full use of its power. The ungodly may dispute the truth, but it will stand. We should not be afraid to boldly promote it. Our Bible-based practices of non-resistance, simplicity, separation from the world, brother- hood assistance, and Christian education may appear foolish to the world, but God’s way works.

A Fraudulent Trial

3. Despite false accusations, true peace and joy radiate from a Christian martyr’s face (6:15). Stephen’s face shone with the joy of the Lord

when he could have been anxious or feeling sorry for himself. Divine power within gives calmness in crisis, a forgiving spirit during false accusations, confidence amid confusion, and peace in the face of death. This divine power is ours as we fellowship with God in prayer and immerse ourselves in His Word.

A Pointed Defence

4. Separation from ungodly associations is essential for endurance (7:51-52). Stephen's accusers were resisting the Holy Ghost, so they were not on God's side as they thought, but were rather serving Satan. Our associates influence our eternal destiny. If we listen long enough to the voices of humanism and individualism, we will be deceived with lies and identify with Satan's side. If we think our walk with God will not be affected by copying the world's styles and fads and seeking man's approval, we are deceiving ourselves.

5. Obedience is required for enduring in the conflicts of life (7:53). Disobedience destroys spiritual vitality. Only a daily walk of obedience will prepare one to be faithful unto death.

6. A bold declaration of truth often provokes resentment and anger in the sinner (7:54). Sometimes the truth hurts; when reminded of sin, guilty consciences are pricked. As we deal with society, we have many opportunities to share what God's Word says about alternate lifestyles, immorality, broken homes, and evolution. In a society with a dwindling knowledge of God and His Word, we may be afraid of looking ridiculous when we speak against sin, but a desire to please God will override our fear of man. Sin is sin, not a sickness. Repentance, confession, and conversion are the cure.

7. A heavenly gaze will be rewarded with grace to endure (7:55-56). We are "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). We can run with patience as we "[look] unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). There is no better example than Jesus, who looked to His Father for strength.

A Noble Martyrdom

8. Victory is found by following Jesus' example of non-resistance and forgiveness (7:60). Like Christ, Stephen thought about the condition of

his tormentors' souls and asked God to forgive them. Both faced mistreatment and death victoriously as men. God will give us the power to face whatever He allows into our lives. He will help us forgive the thief who breaks into our shed and steals our tools or the drunk driver who causes a family member's injury or death.

9. The believer realizes that, regardless of opposition, God is sovereign; His plan will move forward (7:59-8:1). Through Stephen's trial and stoning, Saul was touched in a way that prepared him to respond to Christ's call. Persecution in Jerusalem scattered the believers, exposing many more lives to Christianity. Today we must identify with the apostle Paul's testimony: "As always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1: 20-21).

10. Proper respect for those who "die in the Lord" helps to strengthen the believer's endurance (8:2). The writer of Ecclesiastes said that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting because it causes the living to seriously consider eternity. Attending a saint's funeral can inspire us to press on in life's battles. Our hope of life beyond the grave is founded in our Leader's victory over death. The resurrection gives us strength not only to face martyrdom but also for daily living.

Important Teachings

1. Faith in God is vital to see Him at work in the details of life (6:8).
2. Knowledge of and wisdom from the Scriptures will enable the believer to endure (6:10).
3. Despite false accusations, true peace and joy radiate from a Christian martyr's face (6:15).
4. Separation from ungodly associations is essential for endurance (7:51-52).
5. Obedience is required for enduring in the conflicts of life (7:53).
6. A bold declaration of truth often provokes resentment and anger in the sinner (7:54).
7. A heavenly gaze will be rewarded with grace to endure (7:55-56).
8. Victory is found by following Jesus' example of non-resistance and forgiveness (7:60).

9. The believer realizes that, regardless of opposition, God is sovereign; His plan will move forward (7:59-8:1).
10. Proper respect for those who “die in the Lord” helps to strengthen the believer’s endurance (8:2).
11. The Holy Spirit’s indwelling power is essential for endurance (6:8).
12. Identifying with the faithful of the past provides stability for the challenges of the present (7:52).

Answers to Questions

1. Contrast the wisdom and spirit of Stephen with the motivation of his opponents.

The Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence enabled Stephen to live a blameless life and to speak with supernatural power. His wisdom was from God and was not man’s reasoning. Christ was in control of his spirit and gave him calmness and Words that could not be refuted.

His opponents were learned men but lacked true godly wisdom. They attempted to invalidate his teaching by using logic and argument. When that failed, they used false witnesses to twist the truth and stir up a mob spirit.

2. What signs of faith and power should be evident in our lives?

Others should be able to see that we have faith in God’s promises and do not easily become alarmed by all the negative world news.

We cannot change it, and God is in control, so why worry? The world should see that we love God’s Word and His commands are not grievous; therefore, we can live in victory and submission to Christ’s church.

3. What did the council see when they looked at Stephen?

His face was like the face of an angel, shining with a heavenly glow of peace and the assurance of God’s approval on his life. There was a strange absence of anger and retaliation for being so unjustly accused.

4. How should we respond when falsely accused?

“A soft answer turneth away wrath.” A meek, controlled reply to angry questions can calm an irritated person. Sometimes the best way is to follow Jesus’ example and say nothing.

5. What about Stephen’s message required courage to share it?

No doubt the content of Stephen’s dispute with the Grecians seemed like a challenge to centuries of precedent and custom, hence the charge of blasphemy. His message convicted them.

6. When should we boldly speak out against sinners?

When people use bad language, we should remind them of their accountability to God for their words. When speaking with people who are obviously rejecting the truth and living in rebellion, we should not be afraid to tell them what the Bible says. We are called to witness to the world, and sometimes that includes forthright warning.

7. What is significant about Jesus standing on God's right hand?

Jesus had an intense interest in and concern about what was happening to His suffering saint. He was eager to help Stephen endure to the end, and then to welcome him into glory.

8. Give some evidences of Stephen's calm trust and assurance.

He asked God to receive his spirit and grant mercy to those stoning him. He fastened his gaze on heaven, his source of stability and peace. He knelt, accepting the fact that his life was in God's hands.

9. How can we prepare to face criticism and injustices for being a Christian?

We should remember that whatever we must suffer (even a martyr's death) is worth it when we compare an eternity of heavenly bliss

Summarizing the Lesson

“And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”
Matthew 10:28

Research Guide

1. For some inspirational reading, read accounts in the Martyrs Mirror of faithful martyrs.
2. Study Jesus' teaching on persecution – Matthew 5:10-12, 44; Matthew 10:16-28; Mark 8:35; John 15:18-19.