

Stephen, the First Christian Martyr

Lesson Scope: Acts 6:8-8:2

Lesson Focus

Jesus said, "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord" (Matthew 10:24-25). Stephen's faithfulness was honored by the similarities he shared with his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Both were noted for doing good, 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 loved their enemies, entreating God to forgive them.

Jesus had told the apostles, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8). Indeed, the early Christians were living epistles of a living Lord. Stephen led a long line of men, women, and youth who witnessed for Christ by their death. So many witnesses died for their faith that the Greek word *martus* [witness] became the source of the English word martyr.

Even though we are not facing martyrdom, the Christian character and graces that Stephen displayed should be the possession of every child of God. Emphasize that the conflict between the church and the world is very much alive today. Our courage and conviction are being tested in many ways. Accommodation to the world now will leave us powerless to face persecution.

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.

Lesson Aim: To see qualities that enables the believer to face a martyr's death.

Theme Verses: Romans 8:38-39. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lesson Text:

A Powerful Testimony

Acts 6:8-15 ⁸ 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. 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, 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.

A Convicting Message

Acts 7:1-2 ¹ Then said the high priest, Are these things so? ² 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 7:51-54** ⁵¹ Ye stiffnecked 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.

A Triumphant Death

Acts 7:55-60 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. 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. ⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. ⁶⁰

And he knelt 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 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 Testimony

1. Why were Stephen's opponents unable to resist him?
2. What aspects of Stephen's message caused contention?
3. How can we give evidence of divine influence in our lives?

A Convicting Message

4. How did Stephen identify with the prophets God had sent to Israel?
5. Why did it require courage and conviction for Stephen to give his message?
6. What are situations we must meet with courage and conviction?

A Triumphant Death

7. What inspires the Christian martyr to face death victoriously?
8. How did Stephen identify with Christ in life and death?
9. How can we prepare to be faithful under persecution?

Analyzing the Passage

That Stephen's name was Greek rather than Hebrew implies that he was a Hellenistic Jew. Those who disputed with him were also Greek-speaking Jews. Some were from Cilicia, whose capital was Tarsus. Was Saul of Tarsus one of those who disputed with Stephen?

Suborned (v. 11) means "induced a witness to give false testimony."

The accusations against Stephen in Acts 6:11-14 suggest that he was clearly and forcefully teaching that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the Law. He understood Christianity as a new dispensation, not as a Jewish sect. Apparently, Stephen prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple as judgment on the Jews for their rejection of Christ.

According to Matthew 28:3 and Revelation 10: 1, the face of an angel is noted for its radiance (Acts 6:15).

Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2 also mention the role of angels in the giving of the Law (Acts 7:53).

Principles and Applications

A Powerful Testimony

1. Faith in God and His divine power within are the foundation of a Christian martyr's life (Acts 6:8). By faith the believer sees beyond this world and makes his decisions according to eternal outcomes. Only those who reject the world's offers of pleasure, financial success, and social status will be faithful under persecution.

Divine power within gives calmness in crisis, a forgiving spirit under false accusation, confidence amid confusion, and peace under penalty of death.

2. A faithful witness of the Lord must clearly testify to the truth (Acts 6:10). Not everyone may be an able public speaker, but everyone is called to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh [him] a reason of the hope that is in [him] with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

The Scriptures are the weapons with which we defend truth. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). We testify for truth by using Scripture as illuminated by the Holy Spirit. We avoid sophisticated human arguments, because "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

3. A faithful witness speaks with a burden and compassion that others can feel (6•10). The Gospel is more than a presentation of facts. It is a message that determines the destiny of every man. The heart of God's messengers is in their message. "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). See also 2 Corinthians 6:11.

4. The radiance of true peace and joy shines from a Christian martyr's face (6:15). The facial expression of a Christian reflects divine influence. This divine influence comes to us as we fellowship with God in prayer and through His Word. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

A Convicting Message

5. A faithful witness continues the message of those gone before (Acts 7:51, 52). Stephen's accusers knew the Old Testament Scriptures well. Stephen's appeal met the truth their consciences already knew.

6. The message of truth must be preached with courage and conviction

(Acts 7:51-53). Tolerance is the mood of our times. Men are tolerant of every viewpoint except intolerance. Condemnation of sin is socially unacceptable. Alcoholism is "a sickness." Lying is called "giving misleading information." All good people professing Jesus are "Christians." Those disobedient to Scripture or rebellious to parental or church authority are merely "not very far along on their spiritual journey" or "needing some time to grow."

All sin must be called sin, from homosexuality to casual Christianity. If we have lost our first love, we are sinners (Revelation 2:2-5). Repentance, confession, conversion, and restitution must be taught as the cure for all sin. Are we able and ready to give God's message about sin to a decaying society?

A Triumphant Death

7. A clear vision of Christ inspires the Christian martyr (Acts 7:55-56). Jesus is at the right hand of God. This shows His position, power, and authority. There is nothing for our salvation that He has not secured. We have no need that He cannot fill. No authority can challenge His. All power is given Him in heaven and in earth.

8. The Christian martyr is assured that death is the gateway to glory (Acts 7:59). This certain hope enables martyrs to remain faithful under the most brutal treatment. This hope is founded in our Leader's victory over death. The doctrine of the resurrection is the source of the Christian's strength, not only for facing martyrdom but also for daily living. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ... But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:55-58).

9. The Christian martyr forgives his persecutors (Acts 7:60). This is the supreme proclamation of grace to the world. God was willing, ready, and even eager to forgive those who killed His Son and continued to persecute His people. Paul, who was present here, later declared himself to have been the chiefest of sinners because he persecuted the church. Yet God saved Paul as an example of His abundant grace. True followers of Christ can only display the same gracious forgiveness to those who wrong them.

10. Devout men mourn a martyr's death (Acts 8:2). Even though one dies victoriously, death continues to represent the work of Satan that God has not yet ended. Martyrdom represents the work of Satan against God's peo-

ple. The church felt keenly the loss of Stephen.

Important Teachings

1. Faith in God and His divine power within are the foundation of a Christian martyr's life (Acts 6:8).
2. A faithful witness of the Lord must clearly testify to the truth (Acts 6:10).
3. A faithful witness speaks with a burden and compassion that others can feel (Acts 6:10).
4. The radiance of true peace and joy shines from a Christian martyr's face (Acts 6:15).
5. A faithful witness continues the message of those gone before (Acts 7:51-52).
6. The message of truth must be preached with courage and conviction (Acts 7:51-53).
7. A clear vision of Christ inspires the Christian martyr (Acts 7:55-56).
8. The Christian martyr is assured that death is the gateway to glory (Acts 7:59).
9. The Christian martyr forgives his persecutors (Acts 7:60).
10. Devout men mourn a martyr's death (Acts 8:2).
11. God's faithful witnesses are often falsely accused (Acts 6:11-14).

Answers to Questions

1. Why were Stephen's opponents unable to resist him?

Stephen was preaching with Holy Spirit power from the Old Testament Scriptures, which were inspired of God. Stephen's burden and compassion for souls permeated his message. See Matthew 10:19-20 and Hebrews 4:12.

2. What aspects of Stephen's message caused contention?

No doubt the Jews twisted some of Stephen's words, yet obviously he taught that the Gospel replaced the Law of Moses as God's covenant with His people. Apparently, Stephen prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple as judgment on the Jews for their rejection of Christ.

3. How can we give evidence of divine influence in our lives?

We give evidence of divine influence in our lives when we go the second mile to make peace, show compassion to the unfortunate, and live sacrificially for the good of others. We should always express peace and joy by our words and on our countenance, even in trouble. We give a testimony of

God's sustaining grace throughout the varied experiences of life.

4. How did Stephen identify with the prophets God had sent to Israel? He taught that unbelieving Israel was uncircumcised in heart. See Jeremiah 4:4. He declared that the present generation of unbelieving Jews was committing the same sins their fathers had. Just as the past prophets had come to Israel in the Name of the Lord, so the church preached to Israel by the power of the Holy Spirit.

5. Why did it require courage and conviction for Stephen to give his message?

Stephen knew his listeners would not accept God's indictment against them. The Jews were guilty of serious sins: (1) They were resisting the Holy Spirit. (2) They had murdered the Messiah. (3) They had not kept the Law, which had been given by angels.

6. What are situations we must meet with courage and conviction?

We meet many Christian professors who tolerate sin in their lives and in their churches. Many people do not accept the Bible's definition of sin. Many of our relatives have accepted casual, lukewarm, or halfway Christianity. We must relate to them without giving them a sense of our approval. Many members of conservative churches have lost the original vision of their movement. We face pressure to compromise a safe position.

7. What inspires the Christian martyr to face death victoriously?

A clear vision of Christ inspires the Christian martyr. The Christian understands the position, power, and authority that Christ possesses at the Father's right hand. Because Christ rose triumphantly from the dead, we are assured that death is the gateway to heaven.

8. How did Stephen identify with Christ in life and death?

In his short ministry, Stephen unashamedly gave the message of salvation through Christ. Just as men wondered at the gracious words that Christ spoke, so they could not resist the spirit by which Stephen spoke.

The vision of the exalted Christ that Stephen saw at his death was the view he had seen previously by faith. Stephen yielded his life without resistance to his enemies, as Christ had. Following the example of Christ, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his abusers as he died.

9. How can we prepare to be faithful under persecution?

We must remember in these times of ease that the world is not a friend to grace. The conflict between the church and the world is very real now. If we are not faithful in avoiding worldly entanglements now, we will fail in time of persecution.

Summarizing the Lesson

"Among a great number we perceived a god fearing hero and knight of Christ, who, advancing before others, went cheerfully unto suffering and death, in which he acquitted himself so well that he fought or pressed his way with such force through the strait gate, that he left his flesh on the posts" (Martyrs Mirror, p. 6).

Martyrdom stands as the supreme symbol of the conflict between the church and the world. Even though the stones are not flying in our faces and the chains are not rattling around our ankles, the conflict between the church and the world is not less. If we hope to be faithful under persecution, we must avoid making concessions to the world now.

Research Guide

1. Read the "Author's Preface" to the Martyrs Mirror.
2. Read Michael Sattler's nineteen points in the Mennonite Encyclopedia, Volume 4, page 428, to understand the Anabaptist view of the conflict between the two kingdoms.