

PAYING THE PRICE / Sunday School- October 14, 2012

Unifying Topic: STEPHEN'S MARTYDOM

Lesson Text

I. Reversing The Charges (Acts 7:51-53)

II. A Glorious Death (Acts 7:54-60)

III. The Dawn Of Persecution (Acts 8:1)

The Main Thought: And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus. receive my spirit. (Acts 7:59, KJV).

Unifying Principle: When strong leaders confront traditional ideas, their words may incite anger and violence. What causes such violent reactions? Stephen's criticism of the religious establishment and his exaltation of Christ enraged the religious leaders and they stoned him to death.

Lesson Aim: To teach students about Stephen's unflinching faith in the face of death.

Life Aim: To reinforce the commitment of faith that promotes a willingness to sacrifice our lives for the sake of Christ.

7:51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

7:52 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:

7:53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

7:54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

7:55 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,

7:56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

7:57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

7:58 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.

7:59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

7:60 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.

8:1 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 Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

HISTORY:

Chapter 7:42-50—Stephen is still speaking before the Sanhedrin council, not in defense of himself but still giving them a history lesson. Stephen quotes from the Old Testament of Amos 5:25-27. The Israelites had in fact given such offerings in the desert, but since their hearts were not right, God nevertheless judged them. They also carried this same action into the Promised Land. However, it didn't fool God. God allowed them to do what they wanted. These charges against Israel or against the people are a real eye-opener as to how God saw Israel in the Old Testament.

1. **Charge 1:** the people (Israel) did not worship God, but worshiped false gods. They worshiped the host of heaven, that is, the sun, moon, and stars. Their hearts and thoughts were upon the world (Egypt) and its idols. God's response was the same as the people's act; what they had sown, they were to reap (v.42).
2. **Charge 2:** the people (Israel) did not carry the tabernacle of God, but of the false gods. Publicly and outwardly they were carrying the tabernacle of God wherever they went, but again, their hearts and thoughts were upon false gods. God's response was to give them up to their lusts (v.43).
3. **Charge 3:** the people were inexcusable. Why? Because they were greatly blessed (vv.44-47).
 - a. They were blessed with the tabernacle. Moses has constructed it by the instruction of God (v.44-45).
 - b. They were blessed with the presence and favor in leaders (Joshua, David, and Solomon (v.46).
 - c. They were blessed with the temple. David had desired to build the temple, but it was Solomon whom God appointed to construct it (v.47). They had every chance available, yet they still chose the world instead of God.
4. **Charge 4:** the people did not understand the temple. ¹Stephen wanted the people to know of God's real

¹ <http://www.bible.ca/ef/expository-acts-7-1-53.htm>

presence. "The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands." They had misunderstood the function of the temple (vss. 44-50). God cannot be confined to a place. **Verse 49** says, "Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool... Hath not my hand made all these things?" (v.50). Stephen's point is that God is greater than the temple and thus the Jewish leaders were guilty of blaspheming by confining God to it.

LESSON:

Acts 7:51-53 Reversing The Charges

7:51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Stephen is still speaking to the Sanhedrin council. This was the climax of Stephen's speech. ²The people in Stephen's audience were proud about their religion. They thought that they were very holy people. They studied the scriptures. But they did not hear what God was saying. They thought like people who do not know God. They were exactly like their ancestors.

5. **Charge 5:** the people of the present generation were resisting the Holy Spirit (v.51). Stephen turned on the present generation and charged them with the very same resistance and rejection as their forefathers. He called them:
 - a. "stiffnecked" (*sklerotracheloi*): hard necked, obstinate, stubborn.
 - b. "uncircumcised in heart" (*aperitmetoi kardiais*): heathens, pagans, lost, aliens, idolaters, false worshipers, ungodly.
 - c. "resisters": persons who resist God; who deliberately oppose or rush against God; who actively struggle and fight against God.

7:52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; God was the one who sent the prophets to His people.

6. **Charge 6:** the people persecuted all the prophets—the very servants who predicted the coming (who offered hope) of the Righteous One (the Messiah) (v.52a). Jesus Christ was the One to whom all the prophets looked, the One who was to secure perfect righteousness for man. Yet, the people rejected, persecuted, and killed the prophets who proclaimed the glorious message of His coming.

7:52c ...of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

7. **Charge 7:** the people, the present generation, fulfilled the prophecies (v.52b). The forefathers had killed the messengers who foretold of the coming of the Just One; but they themselves had gone even further in bring the Just One Himself to a violent death. Stephen depicts the Lord Jesus Christ as one in a long line of such prophets whom the Jews betrayed and murdered. He called them betrayers and murderers because they are doing as their forefathers; following in their footsteps. They were really condemning themselves.

7:53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

8. **Charge 8:** the people, the present generation, have not kept the law (v.53). ³God had chosen the Jews for his special purposes. He had given the Law to them. He had sent His Messiah, but they had opposed both the Law and the Messiah. The law had been put into effect by the hands of angels. Yet, they had not kept it. They glorified in the law, but violated it just as much as their forefathers.

Stephen had turned the tables from himself to his accusers. They were the ones guilty of the charges of worshiping false gods, carrying the tabernacle but their hearts were upon the false gods, being so blessed with God's presence, yet chose the world, they were resisting the Holy Spirit, they persecuted the prophets, fulfilled the prophecies, and they had not kept the Law. Stephen was on trial for his life. He had been called upon to defend himself, but instead of actually defending himself, Stephen had preached about the tragic failure of the people to follow and obey God. With so many charges against them, how could Stephen be the one who was wrong?

Acts 7:54-60 A Glorious Death

7:54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. Stephen's

² <http://www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/acts-lbw.htm>

³ <http://www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/acts-lbw.htm>

<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sundayschool.html>

message had been effective and convicting. It had done its job. Conviction can go either way. It can either cause a person to turn to God, confessing his sin, or cause a person to react against God. Three things happened:

1. "*When they heard these things*"— This is present. It was while they were hearing Stephen preach, that conviction was taking place. He was preaching and the Spirit of God was convicting, trying to get through to the hearts of the people. God was giving the people another chance.
2. "*They were cut to the heart*"— (*dieprionto tais kardiais*). The word "*dieprionto*" means to saw asunder, to cut through. It is used to show violent reaction. The response of their hearts was anger, not godly sorrow. They had no intention of confessing that they had been wrong.
3. "*They gnashed on him with their teeth*"— (*ebruchon*). The word means to bite, to grind, to gnash the teeth just like a pack of snarling dogs. The people were in a rage, filled with anger and malice, ready to do violence, ready to unleash the fury of their emotions.

When the human heart rebels against God, it becomes disturbed and tormented. God caused the human heart to be...

- uncertain and insecure
- disturbed and trouble
- indignant and reactionary
- etc.

Prov.29:1 says, "*He that being often reproveth hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.*" They were exceedingly enraged and indignant and could no longer restrain themselves.

7:55 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,— Stephen was a man who was always filled with the Spirit, but there was something different about this instance. Stephen had become a martyr for his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

1. God filled Stephen with a very special infilling of the Spirit; a presence and manifestation that caused an awareness engulfing and embracing him, a power and grace to bear and go through whatever lay ahead.
2. God gave Stephen a vision into heaven; enabling him to see into the other world, the spiritual world or spiritual dimension of being.
 - a. Stephen "*saw the glory of God*". He saw God in the brilliant light of His person, full of splendor and radiance.
 - b. Stephen saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Jesus is usually said to be sitting on the right hand of God, symbolizing His authority as man's Lord and Intercessor. But here He is standing, which symbolizes his overlooking the scene and care of His dear follower and the joyful reception of His faithful servant.

Can you imagine the glorious sight? We shall behold every sight in Stephen's vision and much more; in a moment's time, in a twinkling of an eye. The genuine believer will pass from this life into the next world immediately, never tasting or experiencing death.

7:56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. After looking up toward heaven, he saw the most spectacular event.

3. God gave Stephen a glorious testimony. Seeing such a scene, Stephen just burst forth proclaiming the glorious vision he was experiencing. It was most likely a natural outburst of joy and ecstasy; a testimony of the truth of the otherworld to those standing around him. The Son of man is at the right hand of God. Therefore, Stephen was proclaiming...
 - a. that Jesus is the Son of God.
 - b. that our faith in Jesus is not in vain.
 - c. that Jesus is exactly whom He claimed to be.

7:57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,— ⁴Stephen's vision annoyed the men in the Sanhedrin even more. They did not want to listen to Stephen. So, they covered their ears with their hands. To them, Jesus was a criminal. And there was something even worse than that. He had died on a cross. Jews believed that God rejected a person, if that person died on a cross. But Stephen saw that Jesus was at God's right side. This meant that Jesus had the same authority as God. Again, incensed by the calm, quiet attitude of Stephen, the crowd rushed upon him. The persecutors were actually opposing him. Their behavior had reached to a peak of insanity.

⁴ <http://www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/acts-lbw.htm>
<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sundayschool.html>

7:58 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. Casting Stephen out of the city was in accordance with the usual custom. Stoning him was the punishment in the law for blasphemy. Under Roman rule, the Sanhedrin did not have the legal right to execute without Roman concurrence. Although this was not legal, Pilate apparently either turned a deaf ear to the situation or was not surprised of it, nevertheless, the action was carried out in the rage of the Jews. In the case of the witnesses, that is, the false witnesses laid down their "*outer garments*" which was the custom when they ran or worked. As they laid down their garments, they secured Saul to take care of their garments. He was near enough and it reflects his deep involvement in this repulsive affair and his introduction into this matter. It does not implement him as casting any stone at Stephen. As was customary, the witnesses were the first to cast their stones. This duty was prescribed both in the Mishnah and also in the Law itself.

7:59 And they stoned Stephen,— This stoning was not a formal execution but an act of mob violence. They didn't understand that Stephen's words were truth, because they were not seeking the truth. They only wanted support for their own views. **7:59b ...calling upon God, and saying,**—Stephen began to call God, who was ready to receive him! He had trusted and lived for Christ during life, so he could expect to trust and live for Christ in eternity!

7:59c ...Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. This utterance of Stephen echoes the Lord's utterance from the cross. On his knees and being constantly bombarded with stones, Stephen's one concern was not for himself but for those who were his persecutors. There were two prayers on his lips: "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*" (v.59c) and "*Lord, lay not this sin to their charge*" (v.60b); one for him, and one for the persecutors.

7:60 And he knelt down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. As the Lord cried unto the Father, "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Lk.23:34), so too, Stephen cries unto the Lord in a loud voice, "*Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.*" When the men of Israel were at their worst, the man Stephen was at his best. He knelt down to purposely pray. He interceded to the Lord God of heaven for those who persecuted him. Even in death his concern was for their eternal life. **7:60c ...And when he had said this, he fell asleep.** It says, "*he fell asleep*" indicating: *a peace, it is well with my soul, or even when a person lays down at night and just sleeps into Jesus' arms.* I can remember when my dad passed. The head of his bed was toward the wall. On this particular day I kept putting him toward the head of the bed and he kept going toward the foot of the bed where the door entrance was. Evidently, he knew something I didn't. I finally gave in and let him lay at the foot of the bed. He died in my arms as I quoted the 23rd Psalm. There was such a peace in the room with he and with me because he had entered where his Shepherd was. Stephen was simply in the arms of the Lord who had been standing on the right hand of God waiting for him to come. It may not have seemed like a glorious death, but it was for Stephen because he could see into the heavenlies which brought to him such a peace.

Acts 8:1 The Dawn Of Persecution

8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. Stephen's message was God's final invitation to Israel. Israel had rejected the message and they launched a savage persecution against the church, attempting to utterly destroy it.

1. The persecution was launched by an inflamed man named Saul of Tarsus. The word "*consenting*" or approving (*suneudokon*) means to give full consent of the will; willingly approve; approve with pleasure etc. Saul was a Pharisee. He felt that the preaching of Christ threatened his religion, Judaism.

8:1b And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem;

2. The persecution was launched quickly, on the very day of Stephen's death. The words "*at that time*" (*en ekeinei tei hemera*) mean on the very same day. The believers were frightened and on the run. Therefore, Saul had to strike immediately to catch them before they could escape.
3. The persecution was launched in fury and in violence. Note the words "*great persecution*" (*diogmos megas*), means that Saul hotly pursued, chased down the believers; bent on violence, utterly determined to stamp out the church.

8:1c ...and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

4. God overruled and used the persecution as a means to scatter the church all across the world. Just as Jesus had instructed—Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth were now to hear the glorious message of the gospel (Acts 1:8). Note the apostles remained behind.
- They had been given some freedom by the authorities on the advice of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-40).
 - They were highly esteemed by the public at large and on other occasions the authorities feared to have them arrested lest their arrest cause an uprising among the people (Act 4:21).
 - The apostles were courageous men and they had learned to wait upon the Lord for instruction.
 - i. If the apostles had fled Jerusalem, there would have been no stabilizing person at the church, no leader holding the church together. Remember, the only organized church in existence was the church in Jerusalem. The believers, although imprisoned and scattered, still needed a church to look toward.
 - ii. If the apostles had fled, the church would have been destroyed. There would be no church to picture, no place from which to look for help and direction.
 - Therefore, it was important for the apostles to remain there, important for their loyalty and availability to the church to be known. They held the church together. No matter where the believers had scattered, they knew that the church still existed through its courageous leaders.

SUMMARY:

57:51-53 Now that Stephen has shown how the Jews rejected Moses and David and tried to confine God when the Word declared He can't be confined. He then connects what they are doing to the examples he has given. (Luke 11:47-51) If they were open to the work of the Holy Spirit they would have been convicted and repented. But he declared they always resist the Holy Spirit. He knew the outcome was not going to be good, that they would follow the pattern of history. Who was really on trial? Stephen laid out an airtight case for their conviction.

7:54-58 They acted exactly in keeping with the examples Stephen had given. Stephen saw the glory of Jesus, exactly what they were debating with him about. The right hand of God is the place the Messiah was to ascend, the place of authority. They didn't want to hear another word. His argument was so convincing and words so powerful that they felt they must silence him. So they dragged him out to stone him and had a man named Saul watch their cloaks while they stoned him.

7:59-60 As the persecutors stoned Stephen, He prayed for Jesus to receive his Spirit and asking God to forgive them. He then fell asleep knowing he would be with the Lord.

8:1The death of Stephen was the signal for an outbreak of persecution which compelled the Christians to scatter and to seek safety in the Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the earth. However the apostles stood fast. They braved whatever perils that might come.

APPLICATION:

Unflinching faith come with a price. A martyr is one who suffers for a cause; one who sacrifices willingly. Jesus paid the ultimate sacrificial price.