

What Would You Do for Your Faith?

Acts 7:54-60

The Stoning of Stephen

Have you ever thought about what you are willing to do for your faith? Are you willing to be witness to what you know about what God has done for us through Jesus? Are you willing to be witness to what God has done in your life? Are you willing to be misunderstood or criticized? Are you willing to have your life in danger for your faith? In our scripture today Stephen had to answer the question, what will I do for my faith.

To understand Stephen's situation, we must go back to a last few sermons. Remember two weeks ago Peter and the Apostles had received the Holy Spirit and were empowered to witness in languages that the pilgrims to Jerusalem were able to understand. 3,000 Jews accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior and were baptized. The group worshipped in the temple; shared their meals in common and observed the Lord Supper from house to house; and shared with each other their material possessions as they had need. For a time the Apostles peacefully co-existed with the Jews, but conflicts arose when Peter and John were used by the Holy Spirit to heal a 40-year-old man who had been cripple. The Sanhedrin, the same council that asked Pilate to crucify Jesus for blasphemy, brought Peter and John before their council and commanded them not to preach in the name of Jesus. After much persecution, which included imprisonments and beatings, the community of faith continued in prayer and continued to grow. This growth led to the church choosing 7 deacons to serve meals to the Greek widows. But the scriptures tell us these deacons were filled with the Holy Spirit, and some of them became great witnesses for the faith. Stephen was one of these deacons.

Stephen was not ashamed to share his faith with others. The Bible even says that the Holy Spirit, through him and the apostles, worked great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. When opposition arose Stephen was seized and taken before the Sanhedrin. In response to their questions about whether he was guilty of blasphemy, Stephen preached an eloquent Gospel sermon. He, like Peter in his first Gospel sermon, took his audience back to what they already knew. He told them about Abraham and God, the Patriarchs, Moses and the Law, and how their ancestors had tried God in the wilderness. They were with him until he got to the part about the fact that God had sent Jesus to be the Righteous One and they had rejected Jesus, not only the savior and redeemer of Israel, but of the entire world; and had him killed by handing Jesus over to the Romans to die on the cross. That brings us to our scripture. When they heard these words they were furious and acted just like little children who did not want to listen to someone. The response of the Sanhedrin was immediate and violent. They quickly saw the theological implications of Stephen's doctrine—Israel was guilty; the Law was temporary; the temple must be done away—so they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. To them his words were blasphemy, punishable by death (Lev. 24:16). This council killing Stephen is ironic because their forefathers, having worshiped the gods of the Canaanites (Acts 7:43), should have been put to death, according to Moses (Lev. 20:2). But they could not see, or chose not to see the guilt of their fore parents, nor did they choose to see their own guilt!

Although he was being stoned, Stephen was not intimidated, for he was full of the Holy Spirit (cf. 6:3, 5, 10), saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God to welcome him home.

In words reminiscent of Jesus, Stephen committed his spirit to the Lord and prayed for his enemies (cf. Luke 23:34, 46). In the King James Version Luke

recorded the fact of his death by simply writing, he fell asleep. For a Christian, one's body (not soul) sleeps in death (cf. John 11:11; 1 Thes. 4:13, 15).

You wonder what kind of a world we live in when good and godly people like Stephen can be murdered by religious bigots! But we have similar problems in our "enlightened" age today: taking hostages, bombings that kill or maim innocent people, assassinations, and all in the name of politics or religion. The heart of humans has not changed, nor can it be changed apart from the grace of God.

You might be thinking what a waste of such a promising Christian life! But when we live our lives for our faith, it is never wasted. Let's examine the results of Stephen's death. For Stephen, death meant coronation (Rev. 2:10). He saw the glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him to heaven (see Luke 22:69). The scriptures tell that Jesus sat down when He ascended to heaven (Ps. 110:1; Mark 16:19), but He stood up to welcome to glory the first Christian martyr (Luke 12:8). Stephen used Jesus' title "Son of man" to witness that Jesus is indeed Israel's Messiah.

Stephen was not only tried in a manner similar to that of our Lord, but he also died with similar prayers on his lips (Luke 23:34, 46; Acts 7:59–60). A story is told of a heckler who once shouted to a street preacher, "Why didn't God do something for Stephen when they were stoning him?" The preacher replied, "God did do something for Stephen. He gave him the grace to forgive his murderers and to pray for them!"

For Israel, Stephen's death meant condemnation. This was their third murder: they had permitted John the Baptist to be killed; they had asked for Jesus to be killed; and now they were killing Stephen themselves. When they allowed Herod to kill John, the Jews sinned against God the Father who had sent John (Matt. 21:28–32). When they asked Pilate to crucify Jesus, they sinned against God the Son (Matt. 21:33–46). When they stoned Stephen, Israel sinned against the Holy

Spirit who was working in and through the Apostles (Matt. 10:1–8; Acts 7:51). Jesus said that sinning against the Holy Spirit was unforgivable (Matt. 12:31–32). Biblical historians say judgment finally came in A.D. 70 when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

For the church in Jerusalem, the death of Stephen meant liberation. They had been witnessing “to the Jew first” ever since Pentecost, but now they would be directed to take the message out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and even to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19–26). The opposition of the enemy helped prevent the church from becoming a Jewish “sect” and encouraged them to fulfill the commission of Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18–20.

Finally, as far as Saul (Acts 7:58) was concerned, the death of Stephen eventually meant salvation. He never forgot the event (Acts 22:17–21), and no doubt Stephen’s message, prayers, and glorious death were used of the Spirit to prepare Saul for his own meeting with the Lord (Acts 9). It is said that God never wastes the blood of His saints. Saul would one day see the same glory that Stephen saw and would behold the Son of God and hear Him speak!

When Christians die, they “fall asleep” (John 11:11; 1 Thes. 4:13). The body sleeps and the spirit goes to be with the Lord in heaven (Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:6–9; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 12:22–23). When Jesus returns, He will bring with Him the spirits of those who have died (1 Thes. 4:14), their bodies will be raised and glorified, and body and spirit will be united in glory to be “forever with the Lord.” Even though we Christians weep at the death of a loved one (Acts 8:2), we do not sorrow hopelessly; for we know we shall meet again when we die or when the Lord returns.

God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1–2). In some respects, it may be harder to live for Christ than

to *die* for Him; but if we are living for Him, we will be prepared to die for Him if that is what God calls us to do.

In 1948, Aucas martyr Jim Elliot wrote in his journal, "I seek not a long life, but a full one, like You, Lord Jesus." Two years later, he wrote: "I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have kept on earth till they were older. God is peopling Eternity, and I must not restrict Him to old men and women."

Like Stephen, Jim Elliot and his four comrades were called on January 8, 1956, to "people Eternity" as they were slain by the people they were seeking to reach. What has happened to the Aucas since then is proof that the blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church. Many Aucas are now Christians.¹

Last week we all heard about an interview with Stephen Hawking. A belief that heaven or an afterlife awaits us is a "fairy story" for people afraid of death, Hawking said.

In another situation a man in New York predicted the end of world between 5:00 and 6:00 PM yesterday. Either we all missed it or he was wrong. Jesus said no one except God knows the time of the Second Coming. But we know we can be ready. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

However, those of us who have placed our faith in Jesus have a great hope. All the prophets and all of our scriptures point us to this. Stephen was willing and able to stand for his faith because he knew the Resurrected Lord. I pray that if you have not yet put your hope in Jesus, you will do so today.

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Ac 7:54