

2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters

Sermon Series - The Book of Acts/God's Plan for His Church

Sermon Title: Stephen: Man of God, Martyr for Christ

Sermon Title - Sermon Text - Acts 6:3-15; 7:54-60

Sermon Presenter - Eddie Riley

Last week, Pastor Larry spoke of a problem in the church at Jerusalem. The problem was that there were those in the church who were not getting ministered to. The solution was that they would choose 7 men to fill the ministry of tending to the needs of the widows within the church.

I. The Content of His Character

Acts 6:3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them

Acts 6:4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

Acts 6:5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

Acts 6:6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Acts 6:7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

A. (3) – Stephen was chosen from the men in the church; thus, the church knew they had a good reputation, witness, and testimony about what God had done in their lives.

B. (3, 5) – Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. Pastor Larry preached on Acts 4 but let us see what it looks like when men and women of God are filled with the Holy Spirit –

Acts 4:29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Acts 4:30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

Acts 4:31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Acts 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

Acts 4:33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

Acts 4:34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales

Acts 4:35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

1. When filled with the Holy Spirit, God's word is spoken boldly, even when the message is not a popular one, for they preached the resurrection of Jesus (29; 31B, 33).

2. Mighty works of God (healed and performed signs and wonders) (30)
 3. Prayers move the heart and mind of God (31)
 4. One heart and one mind (32)
 5. Spirit filled believers have a generous, giving spirit and are good stewards of what God has entrusted to them (32-35).
- C. The result of these men of God being full of the Holy Spirit was that that the word of God spread, and many were saved, including the most religious of all people, priests! (v. 7)
- D. (3) – Stephen was full of God’s wisdom and discernment which comes from walking closely with God, allowing His Word to train us in His ways.
- E. (5) – man of faith. Being full of faith not only would have extinguished the fiery darts of the evil one with the shield of faith, but dispelled the fear of those early persecutors of the church...and eventually allayed even the worst of all fears – the fear of death.
- F. These characteristics were given by God for the purpose of strengthening, edifying, and glorifying the church...which was done through the planting of the seed of God’s Word in the lives of men and women, and then watering, weeding, and nurturing them over time so that God could give the increase.
- G. A person filled with the Holy Spirit, with his life freed from the power of sin, his heart fixed upon the Lord our God, is delivered from the desire to exalt oneself, and exists solely to exalt the Savior.
- H. We do not, nor cannot, know the type of man Stephen was before he came to Christ...but we can know this, he was a sinner just like each of us. God did not call him to salvation because he was “a good ol’ boy”.
- I. I say that because I believe we tend to think a lot of our Biblical heroes were good BEFORE they came to Christ, and because of that, WE could NEVER be the man/woman of God that they were. Don’t buy into the enemy’s lies.
- J. God made Stephen who he became. God made Stephen the great man of God he was. And that same God is still in the business and saving and changing people’s lives today...and can, and will, save and transform your life today.
- K. God needs men and women today who are filled with God’s Spirit and His wisdom...and all you have to do is make yourself available to Him. He can and will do the rest in you and through you.

II. His Contentment in Christ

Acts 6:8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

Acts 6:9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen,

Acts 6:10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Acts 6:11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.”

Acts 6:12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

Acts 6:13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

Acts 6:14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Acts 6:15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

A. As the church began to grow and become more powerful, the Jewish elite became more worried about their hold on the Jewish people.

B. As Stephen began to perform great wonders and signs among the people, these Jewish councilmen confronted Stephen, but were no match for his God-given wisdom.

C. Because of their efforts to find something to indict Stephen with failed, they persuaded men to bear false witness against Stephen, saying he had spoken blasphemy against Moses and against God.

D. Those who lied about Stephen made 2 accusations –

1) they claimed Stephen said that

Jesus would destroy the temple. This is what Jesus actually said,

Matthew 24:1 "Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

Matthew 24:2 'Do you see all these things?' he asked. 'Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.'"

The destruction of the Temple did come to pass in 70 A.D. when it was destroyed by the Romans.

2) and they said he spoke blasphemous words against Moses and the Law because Stephen taught that Jesus was greater than Moses and the Law.

E. A godly contentment is when you are a Joseph, and a false accusation has been made against you and you find yourself in prison in a foreign land with God's peace upon you.

F. Godly contentment is when you are facing the fiery furnace as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did, and you are given a chance to renounce your faith, but you say I'll never bow before another god. You are at peace with God, full of faith as neither the flames nor even the smell of smoke affects your clothes, much less your body, as you discover the presence of the 4th man in the fire...His peace permeating the very depth of your soul.

G. It's the peace Paul had while being stoned, in prison, in beatings, and shipwrecks, and the peace he had while facing death as he said, "For me to live is Christ, but to die is gain."

H. It was this peace that Stephen had when opposition and false accusations arose (v. 9).

I. This is what Stephen DID teach:

1. Jesus was greater than Moses, for
2. Jesus was/is/always will be God.
3. Jesus was greater than the Temple

Isaiah 66:1 This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?"

Isaiah 66:2 Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

Because Jesus IS God, and the LORD says here that His throne is in heaven, not on earth, then the temple is NOT His dwelling place.

4. Jesus fulfilled the Law

Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

Matthew 5:18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

5. And he taught that Jesus was greater than their religion and traditions.

J. Contentment in Christ leads to being used for His service – (8) Being content in Christ, frees us from spending our time, talents, and treasures pursuing the world and worldly things so that we can be used by our Lord to further His kingdom here on this earth.

K. True contentment in Christ is not affected by the outward, temporal things of the world such as opposition or persecution (9), for our eyes are on Jesus.

John 16:33 – "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

L. How would we act if we were facing a powerful council of men who hated us, wanted us dead, and were more than willing to trump up charges to see to it that they could carry that plan out.

M. The Sanhedrin probably believed Stephen would bow to the fear that the world surely would have thought he had (just as you and I would PROBABLY have).

N. Therefore, it had to be a mysterious matter to look upon the accused and see a man whom had been filled with the peace of God, (v. 15) and his face reflected that peace.

O. There was no sign of fear, terror, turmoil, or concern...only peace and contentment.

P. His trust, faith, and hope were in the hands of Jesus, and he knew His God would never leave him nor forsake him, even if death was imminent.

Q. Whatever we seek to find our identity in is what we attempt to draw our contentment

from. What do you find your contentment in? Money? Possessions? Job? Family? You can never find true, peaceful contentment in the things of the world. Stephen found his identity firmly in Jesus Christ. If we seek to find contentment in any other place, we will fail.

R. As he faced the council about these charges, Stephen represented himself, but instead of defending himself...he preached to the council, laying out the fact that it was the Jewish people who rejected the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, failed to live the Law, put the Temple above God himself, and most importantly...rejected the Lord Jesus Christ.

S. This is a brief summary of the sermon Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin.

T. God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia to go to Canaan, the Promised Land, then made a covenant with Abraham that his faith would be rewarded in that his seed would be blessed and they would receive the land God had sent Abraham into. Thus began the beginning of the Patriarchs of the Jewish people.

U. Stephen then pointed out that God had chosen Joseph out of the tribes of Israel, but the forefathers had sold him into slavery into Egypt. God delivered Joseph and delivered the forefathers (the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel).

V. Then God raised up Moses to deliver His chosen people out of Egypt. After being reared by Pharaoh's wife and family, Moses checked on his Hebrew brethren. He defended them by killing an Egyptian. But the Hebrew people misunderstood what God was doing and His purpose for Moses, so Moses fled into the desert for 40 years before returning to lead God's people out of Egypt. Moses stood upon holy ground as God commissioned His chosen servant to deliver the Hebrews. And yet, God's people disobeyed Him and Moses and rejected them both as, "in their hearts", they went back into Egypt, which is used in Acts 7:39 – "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him, and in their hearts, turned back to Egypt." Egypt is used as a "type of the world", as they did not physically go back into Egypt from the wilderness but did turn there in their hearts as they built the golden calf and worshiped it. Then God turned away from them gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon, and stars.

W. Stephen then shows how the forefathers of this very tribunal he stood before turned their backs upon God and they worshiped other idols. They turned against, and persecuted, the prophets of God whom He had sent to warn them of the very things they were doing. And they did not understand the temple, that God could not be confined to one place on this earth. Stephen then tells them like it is when he calls them a stiffnecked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears.

X. If they were not ready to render their verdict before these words from Stephen, there is little doubt they were at this point...but he was not through yet. He then tells them that the Just One, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom the Prophets of old had spoken of had been sent as the Messiah, the Savior of the Jewish people. They then are told that they are the very ones who betrayed and murdered Jesus. To then twist the knife that he had just stuck into their hardened, uncircumcised hearts, he stated, that they "have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." To hear Stephen say that these well-heeled, self-righteous men had not obeyed the law would have most likely been enough to sentence him to die, even if he had not spoken another word against them.

Y. Thus, we see our final point this morning – we see “The Cross He Chose”.

III. The Cross He Chose

Acts 7:54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

Acts 7:55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Acts 7:56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Acts 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,

Acts 7:58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Acts 7:60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

When he had said this, he fell asleep.

A. As Stephen was speaking his peace with the council, he would have known full well that he would be put to death for his words unless the Lord Jesus intervened.

B. However, he **CHOSE** to stand firm upon God and His Word – no matter the consequences.

C. Matthew 16:24 – “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

D. That is exactly what Stephen was doing. Let us note in the passage in Matthew that the cross Jesus says we are to pick up after denying ourselves, is a cross that we **MUST CHOOSE**. You perhaps have heard someone say, when they get sick, that “This is just the cross I must bear”. That is **NOT** what this Scripture means.

E. Stephen was faced with death – he could have denied the Lord Jesus and his faith and possibly have lived. Instead, he chose to face his accusers and boldly stand on God’s Word – knowing death was rapidly closing in on him.

F. And when the heavens opened up (v. 55), Stephen saw a sight that you and I could only dream of, for he saw the glory of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ **STANDING** at the Father’s right hand. Do not miss the awesomeness of this text. Nowhere else in the Bible does it say that Jesus is **STANDING** next to the Father (Mark 14:62 – “‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”) In this passage in Mark, Jesus is declaring to the high priest that He is the Messiah and saying He will come back to this earth as He is sitting at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2 – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”) ...but here, Jesus was standing up and awaiting the soul of

one of His most precious servants, welcoming him into His arms.

G. Why did God choose to take Stephen? Wasn't he doing a great job? Probably winning souls to the kingdom? Certainly, he was serving many in the church in his day.

H. We cannot know for certain why. However, I believe we CAN say that Stephen has affected far more lives by having this moment relived over the last 2,000 years by being recorded in God's Word than he could have ever influenced by living a longer life in his day.

I. One cannot help but wonder if Paul (Saul) looked at the peace on Stephen's face and heard the words on his lips – 59b-60 – “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them”, as he was being stoned to death, which began Paul's own journey to Christ.

J. Warren Wiersbe wrote, “Denying self is not the same as self-denial. We practice self-denial when, for a good purpose, we occasionally give up things or activities. But we deny self when we surrender ourselves to Christ and determine to obey His will.”

K. Are we there yet? Are we to the place this morning where we can surrender our will to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ?