STEPHEN: THE MARTYR

Acts 7:54-8:3

By

Steven J. Cole

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Acts Lesson 19

**Stephen: the Martyr**  
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From reading many stories of those who have given their lives for the cause of Christ, I have concluded that God gives special grace to them in their dying moments. The Czech martyr, Jan Hus, whose statue and church we saw in Prague, was promised safe passage to discuss his criticisms against the Catholic Church. But they betrayed him and burned him at the stake. He died, not cursing at his persecutors for their deception and brutality, but singing praise to God as the flames consumed his flesh.

The story has been repeated thousands of times. At the head of the list stands Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Our word “martyr” is a transliteration of the Greek word for “witness.” By their lives and by their deaths, the martyrs have borne witness for “Jesus Christ, the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5). Stephen’s death is the only death scene and martyrdom described in detail in the New Testament, except for that of Jesus Christ. From it we learn that ...

Whatever we suffer due to faithfulness to Jesus, we will be rewarded with His eternal acceptance and the encouragement that He will use our service for His purpose and glory.

I want to draw four lessons from Stephen’s death:

1. **Because wicked men are enemies of God, those who speak out boldly for God and against evil will suffer.**

   As Paul later put it, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Satan does not sit idly by when his realm is challenged. And, in His mysterious, sovereign providence, God does not miraculously protect all of His servants who dare to confront the prince of darkness. He allows this choice young man to be cut down in the prime of his ministry.

   The godly manner in which Stephen died is contrasted here with the grisly wickedness of these supposedly respectable Jewish leaders. He was calm, clear-headed, articulate, and kind, even as the rocks were crushing his body. But these normally dignified members of the high council were out of control with rage. They
gnashed their teeth, they screamed at the top of their voices, they covered their ears so as not to hear what they considered Stephen’s blasphemy. They rushed upon him, drove him out of the city, and stoned him to death. The Greek word for “rushed” is used of the herd of demon-possessed swine rushing off the cliff into the ocean after Jesus cleansed the Gerasene demoniac. Scholars debate whether the death sentence on Stephen was a judicial decision or mob violence. While there was a semblance of judicial proceedings at first, the end result seems to be that of men controlled by rage and hatred.

Luke notes that the witnesses who began stoning Stephen laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul (7:58). He adds that “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death” (8:1). As a result, that very day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem. Saul began ravaging the church like a wild boar ravages a vineyard (Ps. 80:13), obviously with the approval of the Sanhedrin. He entered house after house, dragging off to prison both men and women who believed in Jesus. Many of them were put to death (26:10). Saul later described his own behavior as being “furiously enraged at them” (26:11).

When a sinner comes under conviction through hearing the gospel or through the example of a believer’s godly life, he may be broken with repentance and come to faith in Jesus Christ. But, he also can harden his heart and go deeper in rage, as Saul did. Some maintain this fierce opposition to the gospel all the way to their deathbeds. Others, like Saul, eventually repent and become new creatures in Christ. But often those around them have to endure increased hostility and rage before they see the person broken by God’s mercy.

Because we live in a time and place where we have relative freedom from violent persecution, we tend to forget that being a follower of Jesus Christ makes us enemies of the evil prince of this world and his followers. Of course, brute force is not his only weapon. He uses deceit and cunning to lull us into adopting worldly values. A worldly Christian is no threat to his domain of darkness. He gets us to live for the selfish pursuit of comfort, with a little church attendance thrown in to round out the good life. It doesn’t hurt his cause when the pastor gives sermons that make
everyone feel good about themselves, teaching them how to use God for personal well-being and overall family happiness.

But the moment a believer moves out of this comfortable Christianity and begins aggressively to go after souls for Christ, or to give radically to the cause of Christ, or to speak out boldly for God against sin, he also moves into the line of enemy fire. Often he catches “friendly fire” from fellow Christians who are threatened by his radical ways. But we should be prepared and not be taken by surprise when we commit ourselves to be 100 percent for the Lord and then suffer for it. It goes with the territory.

Maybe you’re wondering, “Why risk it? Why leave a comfortable, safe way of life to become a target for Satan’s bullets?”

2. Those who suffer for Christ can be assured of His faithful presence and support in their suffering and His acceptance in heaven after death.

Far better to die with Stephen under a hail of rocks crushing our skulls and be welcomed into heaven by the risen Lord Jesus, than to die peacefully in the midst of worldly comforts, surrounded by family, but then to hear, “Depart from Me, I never knew you!”

Note how the Lord supported Stephen in this grand finale of his short life. First, all three members of the Trinity are mentioned in 7:55. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God the Father, which must have looked like the brightness of the sun. To His right hand, there stood the risen and ascended Jesus. Stephen was so awed by this vision that he could not keep it to himself. He said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). This is the only time that this title is used other than by Jesus. Except for two times in Revelation (1:13; 14:14), which use the phrase “one like a son of man,” it is the last time it is used in the New Testament.

There were several reasons that this statement was significant. First, it immediately brought to the minds of every member of the Sanhedrin Jesus’ words when He had been on trial before them. The same high priest, Caiaphas, had asked Jesus, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus replied, “I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and
coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). By these words, Jesus claimed to combine in His person the prophetic words of Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1. The Daniel passage spoke of one like a Son of Man who received from the Ancient of Days “dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.” In Psalm 110, David hears the Lord saying to his Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” Here Stephen affirms that Jesus is exactly where He predicted He would be, at the right hand of God, the risen Lord of power and glory! It should have hit these men with full force that Jesus was exactly who He had claimed to be!

F. F. Bruce (The Book of Acts [Eerdmans]) points out that Stephen’s understanding of the exalted role of Jesus was even more advanced than that of the apostles, who were still continuing to go to temple worship, join in the Jewish rituals, and limit their preaching to the Jews. He points out that the Daniel passage means that “Messiah’s sovereignty is to embrace all nations without distinction,” thus effectively doing away with the Jewish temple worship (pp. 166-167). He writes, “And the presence of Messiah at God’s right hand meant that for His people there was now a way of access to God more immediate and heart-satisfying than the obsolete temple ritual had ever been able to provide.” (p. 166).

Normally, the Scriptures speak of Jesus now sitting at the right hand of God, having accomplished the work of our redemption (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Eph. 1:20). But here, twice it says that Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Most commentators agree that Jesus was standing to welcome home His faithful witness. Jesus always stands with those who stand for Him. He gave this courageous man on the verge of death a vision of the glory of heaven to support him in the terrible moments to follow.

It reminds me of the story of the three bold Hebrew witnesses who refused to bow down before the image of Nebuchadnezzar. In his fury, the mad king had them bound and thrown into the furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. But to his shock, when he and his men looked into the flames, they saw not three men bound, but four men unbound and walking around without harm. And the appearance of the fourth was “like a son of the
gods” (Dan. 3:25). I believe that the preincarnate Jesus had joined these brave witnesses in their moment of trial, to support and encourage them for their faithfulness to Him. He spared them from death, but not Stephen. But He welcomed Stephen home with open arms, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” Whenever the Lord calls on you to suffer for His name, He will be with you to support you. Whether you die then or later, He will welcome you into His presence in heaven for eternity.

3. When we suffer according to the will of God, we can entrust our souls to the faithful Creator and show His love to those who persecute us.

I am using the words of 1 Peter 4:19, written to a suffering church: “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” Stephen did this. As the rocks hit him, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” And, with his dying breath, imitating His Savior’s words from the cross, Stephen did what was right toward his enemies by praying, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Charles Spurgeon (“Stephen’s Death,” Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. 20, [Ages Software]) pointed out that Stephen’s death was full of Jesus: Jesus seen; Jesus invoked; Jesus trusted; and Jesus imitated. I borrow his outline here.

A. Jesus seen.

Stephen looked into heaven and the Lord gave him a literal vision of the splendor of God’s glory and of Jesus standing at the right hand of His throne. If the members of the Sanhedrin had looked up, I think that they would have seen the ceiling of the council chamber. God is not in the business of revealing His heavenly glory to hard-hearted skeptics. In fact, not every saint gets such a literal vision of the Lord. Some dying saints seem to have such a glimpse into glory just before their departure, but many others die without it. For them, it is the vision of Christ through the eyes of faith, through the things revealed of Him in His Word. As Peter wrote to those suffering for His name, “And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:8-9).
To have that kind of vision of the unseen Christ by faith at the moment of death, we have to cultivate it by faith right now. We need to pray as Paul prayed, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to [us] a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” (Eph. 1:17).

B. Jesus invoked.

As Stephen died, he called upon the Lord Jesus in prayer. Clearly, he believed in the full deity of Jesus Christ, or he would not have prayed to Him. It would have been mere superstition or a worthless fancy to call out for help to a great teacher who had died and was still in the grave. Spurgeon wrote, Dying Christians are not troubled with questions as to the deity of Christ. Dear friends, Unitarianism may do to live with, but it will not do to die with, at least for us. At such a time we need an almighty and divine Savior; we want “God over all, blessed forever” to come to our rescue in the solemn article. So Stephen called upon Jesus, and worshipped him. He makes no mention of any other intercessor. O martyr of Christ, why didst thou not cry, “Ave Maria! Blessed Virgin, succor me”? Why didst thou not pray to St. Michael and all angels? Ah, no! The abomination of saint and angel worship had not been invented in his day, and if it had been he would have scorned it as one of the foul devices of hell. There is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. He invoked Christ, and no one else (ibid.).

Whenever we suffer because of our faith, we can call out to the Lord Jesus and know that He is our merciful High Priest, sympathetic to our situation. “For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

C. Jesus trusted.

Clearly, Stephen trusted Jesus to receive his spirit as it was separated from his body at the moment of death. Although he suffered a terrible, violent, painful death, he died with a supernatural peace. He “fell asleep” (7:60) in the arms of His Savior. Sleep refers to the body, which rests in the grave until the resurrection at the coming of Christ. A believer’s soul goes immediately into the
presence of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Jesus suffered a violent death on the cross to remove its sting, so that His followers may fall asleep, even if they are brutally murdered, as Stephen was. While it was proper for devout men to grieve over Stephen’s death and to give him a proper burial, it was for their sakes, not his. He was safe in the presence of the Lord, whom he had trusted for eternal life.

We must daily be trusting Jesus in a practical way in every trial that we face in order to have the habit of faith to trust Him at the moment of death. Stephen’s life was all of one piece. He was full of faith and the Holy Spirit in life; he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit as he died. Are you trusting, really trusting, in Jesus right now? Then it will be your habit to trust Him when you die.

D. Jesus imitated.

On the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In imitation of His Lord, Stephen’s dying words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” That prayer was answered in the conversion of Saul. It was the prayer of a man free from bitterness toward those who were wrongfully killing him. Stephen could pray it because he had practiced a life of forgiving others ever since he had experienced the Lord’s gracious forgiveness of his own sins. We will only be able to show God’s forgiveness toward those who persecute us if we focus daily on how much the Lord Jesus forgave us through His death on the cross.

Thus Stephen’s death teaches us to expect suffering if we follow the Savior. But we also can expect His faithful presence with us and His welcome into heaven when we leave this life. Thus we must entrust our souls to Him and do what is right. Finally,

4. Jesus Christ always uses the suffering of His saints for His greater purpose and glory.

No one suffers for Christ in vain. Stephen laid down his life, but as Tertullian observed, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The persecution that arose against the church scattered the seed of the gospel. Watching Stephen die had a profound and unforgettable effect on Saul. He continued kicking against the goads for a while, but finally the Lord powerfully saved him. Stephen’s sermon and his courageous, calm death softened the soil of
Saul’s heart, preparing him for that later conversion. He later wrote, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Whenever we suffer, whether from persecution or from other trials, we need to keep two things in mind. Number one, “I am not indispensable in God’s work.” If He takes me out now, as He did with Stephen, He can easily raise up many others to continue the work. This will keep us in the proper state of humility. It is Christ who builds His church; I am just a small part of the process. Second, “The Lord is mindful of my service for Him, and He will duly reward even a cup of cold water given in His name.” There are no useless parts in the body of Christ. Whatever you or I do for His name’s sake counts in eternity. Keeping this in mind helps us not to become discouraged and lose heart in the battle.

**Conclusion**

In his gripping book, *Lords of the Earth* [Regal], Don Richardson tells the story of Stan Dale, who obeyed God’s call to take the gospel to the fierce Yali tribe of Irian Jaya. They shot him with five arrows, which he plucked out one by one, while shouting at his tormentors, “Run away home all of you! You’ve done enough!” (p. 276). Although arrows had penetrated his diaphragm and intestines, he managed to hike to safety and survive.

At this point, my attitude would have been, “They’ve had their chance. I’m not going back!” But Dale went back. This time, the warriors decided to make sure that he died. A tribal priest moved in and fired an arrow at point blank range, hitting him under his raised right arm as he pled with them to go home. Another priest shot a bamboo-bladed shaft into his back. As the arrows entered his flesh, Stan pulled them out, one by one, broke them and threw them down. Dozens of arrows were now flying at him from all directions. He kept pulling them out, breaking them, and dropping them at his feet, until he could not keep up. Fifty arrows, then sixty, but still Stan stood his ground. The startled warriors began to worry that he might be immortal. “Fall!” they screamed at Stan. “Die!” Finally, Stan fell, and the warriors repeated a similar attack on his comrade, Phil Masters (pp. 302-305).
To make sure that the two white men did not resurrect, the warriors beheaded them and then chopped their bodies in pieces. Normally, the Yali would immediately eat the bodies of their victims, to increase their life force. But in this case, they waited to make sure that the dismembered bodies would not resurrect. An older tribal member convinced them not to eat them, but to cremate the remains.

It would seem that the two men died in vain. No one dared go back into this dangerous valley. But a missionary pilot got confused in bad weather and flew into the same mountainous valley where the two men had been murdered. The plane crashed, killing everyone on board except a missionary’s nine-year-old son. God used this strange twist of providence to get the gospel to these fierce warriors. To find out how, you’ll have to read the book!

John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim’s Progress, spent twelve years in jail because of his faithful preaching God’s truth. He wrote that at the day of judgment, “a smile or a kind look from Christ shall be worth more than ten thousand worlds” (“The Law and Grace Unfolded,” The Works of John Bunyan [Baker], 1:574). Keep that great day in view every day that you live. If you are called on to suffer for Jesus, you will be blessed, “because the Spirit of glory and of God” will rest upon you (1 Pet. 4:14).

Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: A good dose of persecution would be healthy for the American church.
2. How can we know if we’re truly suffering for the gospel or if we’re suffering because we’re being obnoxious and insensitive?
3. How do the imprecatory Psalms fit in with the idea of loving those who persecute you? Do they apply today (see Rev. 6:10)?
4. Should every believer be “radical” for Jesus? How can we shake off the lethargy of worldliness and be fully committed to Christ?

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