

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, May 10, 2020.

Stephen, a Faithful Witness

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

As we begin this week, I wanted to give you all two updates. First, you should have received an email or physical letter with a copy of the church reopening survey. The church leadership is trying to navigate how the 25-person limit and aggressive mitigation requirements will change our gatherings. In order to follow the state guidelines for reopening, we need some information from you all in order to make the necessary preparations, which may include multiple, smaller services, masks, cleaning, changing our offering collection practices, and more. Your answers to the survey will provide helpful data to help us prepare for gathering in person. Please fill out the survey to the best of your ability and return it to the church office this week.

Second, I wanted to say thank you to you all for your continued, faithful financial giving to First Southern. Our budget took a hit in March as the outbreak started closing everything. April's budget was near our monthly projection, and with spending down due to lack of services, we basically made up for the loss in March. So, our giving has remained consistent. Also, even in the midst of all of this, you all gave almost \$1,200 dollars to the Annie Armstrong Easter offering for North American missions! I can tell you from my involvement with the BRN that state-wide cooperative program giving has drastically fallen and the Annie Armstrong offering took a particularly severe hit. I'm grateful that First Southern was able and willing to give to this as we routinely do. The fact that we are on healthy financial footing, and still giving to our state and national partners is something to celebrate and give thanks to God for. Thank you for your generosity and faithfulness.

Now, as we turn back to Acts, we're going to look at the whole of Stephen's story. We saw last week in the beginning of Acts 6, the appointment of seven Greek-speaking Christians to help serve the Greek-speaking, Jewish widows in the church. One of those men, Stephen, was described by Luke in verse 5 as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. This particular servant's witness concerning Jesus was the cause of an eruption of violence against the Christians in Jerusalem, as well as the propulsion of the gospel and the Christian community out of Jerusalem and into the broader world. The predominant theme running through this text is the bold, faithful witness of a Christian, even in light of death, and how God's Kingdom is unstoppable. This morning we're going to study Acts 6:8-8:3. This is a long text which we'll look at in three main sections, the setting and conflict in Acts 6:8-7:1, Stephen's defense in Acts 7:2-53, and the reaction of the crowd in Acts 7:54-8:3. If you are following along with my manuscript, I usually include the text, but because this one is so long, I would encourage you to grab a Bible and read the text as we get started.

The first section flows right out of Stephen's appointment in the previous verses and sets the stage for his speech in the next chapter, resulting in his death. Right off we see that Stephen, described here as full of grace and power, was doing the same miraculous signs and wonders that the apostles were. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, he was bearing witness about Jesus and the Spirit was doing wondrous things through him to show the validity of the gospel. As he was serving the church and telling others about Jesus, some people from the local synagogue, rose up and opposed his message. These who argued against him were also Greek-speaking Jews. Notice that verse 9 says though they opposed him, they could not overcome him because of the Spirit working through him. Because they could not convincingly win this war of words, they turned to false accusations. As Stephen was accused of blasphemy against God and Moses, the people of Israel along with their leaders arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council we've previously met in

chapters 4 and 5. With false witnesses bringing charges against him, the crowd saw Stephen with his face like that of an angel. This transfigured appearance is ironic because though accused of speaking against Moses, here we see Stephen, like Moses coming down from Sinai in Exodus 34:29-35, with a face radiating the glory of God. At this, the high priest gives Stephen a chance to speak in his defense.

Stephen's speech in Acts 7, is the longest recorded speech in Acts. It is a very brief and select survey of Israel's history that he uses to subtly defend himself against their claims while also arguing against his accusers. The speech has two predominant themes that we'll see as we briefly walk through it. The first is that God is not constrained by a geographic border, land, building, or place such as the nation of Israel or the temple; rather, he is the God of all places. Therefore, the Israelites historically misunderstood worship and the significance of the temple, making them idolaters. The second theme is that Israel has a long history and pattern of rejecting their God-appointed leaders. The defense begins in verses 2-8 by speaking of Abraham. Notice in verse 5 that God promised Abraham an inheritance but that he never possessed it, showing God's work and providence apart from the temple far before it was built. We also see in verse 6-7 that Abraham's children, though long enslaved in another land by another nation, would be rescued by God to worship him in the land of promise. Again, this shows God's sovereignty over Egypt and his desire to be known, loved, and followed by his people wherever they journey.

In verses 9-16, Stephen continued his argument by speaking of Joseph. His primary point was that God's people were blessed by their God-ordained leader, Joseph, that the other patriarchs had rejected. Even in slavery in verse 9, God was with Joseph. God used Joseph's trials and sufferings to providentially provide for his people in a time of famine. Also, though they are now far from the promised land as they went down to Egypt, God was still with his people there, even without a temple.

In verses 17-34, Stephen's defense turned to Moses. In three broad sections, he told of Israel in Egypt and Moses' life before encountering the burning bush in verses 17-22, his time in the wilderness of Midian in verses 23-29, and his calling to lead Israel out of Egypt and through their wilderness wanderings in verse 30-43. Stephen described Moses' early life as one which was unexpected for God's chosen leader. Beautiful in God's sight, he was left out in the river rather than being killed by Pharaoh's men, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, raised up in the best of all worldly wisdom, and as Egyptian as an Israelite could be; yet, he was the leader God appointed. Notice in verses 23-29 that Stephen chose to highlight the significant 40 years of Moses' life spent in Midian by focusing on how he got there. Again, this is Stephen's attempt to show that Israel has a history of resisting and rejecting their God-given leaders. This is particularly clear in verse 35, where he presents Moses as a type of Christ. Moses, clearly called by God to redeem and deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians while performing signs and wonders was rejected by those he was sent to. Stephen, through this example is also implying in verse 37 that Jesus was the Moses to come, spoken in Deuteronomy 18:15.

By this point in his speech, Stephen was transitioning to a polemical indictment against his accusers implicating that they were the ones disobeying God, not him. Notice verses 38-39, Moses was given the Law, the living oracles, but their fathers refused to obey, turning to idolatry. We should be seeing a correlation between how the Israelites rejected Moses and turned to idolatry and how these Jews rejected Jesus and turned to idolatry. Just as they turned to the golden calf while they wandered in the wilderness, when they were settled in the land and had the temple, they still turned away from God to idolatry in verses 42-47. The blistering criticism in verses 48-53 is a direct accusation against these people and their leaders. God is not constrained by a building. The temple had taken an oversized, idolatrous position in Israel's worship. In verse 51, these stiff-necked idolaters always resist their God-given leaders and by doing so resist the Holy Spirit. Just as their fathers had rejected and killed the prophets, the nail in the coffin of Stephen's argument was that these men had reject and killed the Righteous One, Jesus their Messiah. He was not guilty of rejecting the Law and blasphemy, they were.

They were greatly angered at his accusation, but the boiling point was his vision of an exalted, vindicated Jesus. They wanted nothing to do with this Messiah and they covered their ears to avoid hearing him. The mob grabbed him, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him. As they murdered Stephen, he prayed for their forgiveness. Notice the brilliant writing of Luke as he introduced Saul for the first time, a foreshadow of his significance, in verse 58, as well as 8:1 and 3. He, as a Pharisee, watched the execution as a witness and approved of the action. The Sanhedrin didn't have the authority under Roman law to carry out death sentences, so it's likely that this was an act of the people. This is mob violence, not officially sanctioned, nevertheless approved of by the Jewish leaders. Consider how different this is from earlier in the text of Acts. The apostles were only warned in chapter 4 because of the crowds. In chapter 5 they were only beaten because of the crowds. Now, the crowds have turned and they, along with their leaders, kill Stephen for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

There's a bit of a contrast between Stephen, bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus even in his death, and Saul, the apostle of this Jewish idolatry, taking life in the name of his false religion. This zeal to the point of violence is startling and evil, but it helps point to the great contrast we see in Paul in chapter 9. Who, reading this letter for the first time, could imagine this Saul becoming a faithful witness of Jesus and the focus of the second half of the book? In God's wisdom, the vilest are made new. God redeems evil people, and according to his wisdom, even the worst this world can offer can be used to display his glory. Even as we read Acts 8:1, the church is scattered into Judea and Samaria. It seems like nothing but tragedy, until we read verse 4. They were scattered, but where they were scattered, they went preaching the word. Stephen's violent death served to accomplish the purposes of God. Following Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, they were bearing witness not only in Jerusalem, but now Judea and Samaria as well. We'll see that the same gospel will go to the ends of the earth in the rest of the letter, and Saul who approved of Stephen's death and dragged Christians to prison will be the one to carry it there. In Saul's own words penned in Romans 11:33-36, "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

Allow me to offer some application thoughts about this text:

- 1) Stephen's willingness to faithfully bear witness to Jesus, in his life and even to the point of death, is a model that should be emulated for how to live as a Christian. Stephen so faithfully bore witness to Christ, that even the last moments his life reflected the life of Jesus. He, like Jesus, was falsely accused, tried, and executed, all the while praying for his executioners. Stephen died as the first recorded Christian martyr. Interestingly, the root word that our English word "martyr" is derived from is the Greek noun "martus" which mean "witness." In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the apostles that they would be his witnesses, the word "martus," from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Here, even before Stephen gave his life as a martyr, his life was characterized by faithfully telling others about Jesus. Don't forget that his trial in this text was brought about by this very thing. Not only that, think of the way chapters 6-8 describe Stephen. He was full of wisdom, faith, grace, and the Holy Spirit. He faithfully gave his time to serve those in need, particularly those in the church. We should be challenged and encouraged by the example of this man, whose whole life was consumed by telling and showing people the gospel, and ask God to help us love Jesus and our neighbors so faithfully as he did. Ask God to help you grow in faith so that you can be a better witness and a better servant for the glory of Christ.
- 2) We need to hear Stephen's criticism of the Jews and wisely see the ways in which we are in danger of similar idolatry. There is a kind of nominal, casual Christianity that is perilous in our day. The rampant worship wars that pervade our churches, the unhealthy blurring of the lines between

American patriotism and Christian spirituality, the consumer mindset that says church is primarily about me, these all are symptomatic of the kind of idolatry that Israel was guilty of committing. Perhaps at the root of their problem and at the root of ours is an unchecked, spiritual pride. Israel assumed they had God figured out and which allowed them to go through the motions of religion without being truly committed, which ultimately led to them forsaking their first love and allegiance to God. Also, consider the pride represented in the Jew's consistent resisting and rejecting of their leaders. Paul used a similar example in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. All of Israel experienced the miracles of the exodus and Sinai, yet most of them did not please God because of their spiritual hubris. Paul challenged the Corinthians that if they think they're standing firm, they should examine themselves before they fall. Let us heed Stephen's criticism in this text as a warning and consider the condition of our own walk with the Lord. Are we going through the motions of religion, without loving God with all of our heart? Or can we say with full sincerity the words of Paul in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

- 3) As we consider the violence and ugliness of evil perpetrated in this text, let us not forget that God can redeem even the darkest moments for our good and his glory. Stephen's death, though awful and tragic, resulted in untold numbers of people hearing the gospel of Jesus, expanding around the globe and through two millennia as the church scattered away from Jerusalem. Consider how the murderous, idolatrous, zealot Saul would go on to be an apostle of Jesus Christ who would also, like Stephen, faithfully bear witness to Christ even to the point of death. No person is so wicked that they cannot be redeemed by God's grace. No situation is so far gone, that God can't grow fields of hope from the ashes of ruin. We see this in the gospel itself. Though we were all dead in our sins and trespasses with no way to be right before God, God sent his Son. Jesus lived a sinless, perfect life and gave up his life to die a sinner's death in our place to make atonement for our sin. He rose again from the dead three days later showing that God accepted his sacrifice and that those who place their trust in him can be born again and declared to be righteous before God because of Jesus. If God can turn the brutality of Stephen's death into the expansion of the gospel, and the murderer Saul into the apostle Paul, and the ugliness of the cross into the hope and salvation of the empty tomb, consider what he can do in your life. The gospel cannot be stopped. Jesus is Lord and Christ, Savior and King. He can also be your hope this morning, no matter your circumstances. Prayerfully ask God to continue to increase your faith and help you to trust in Jesus.

Sincerely,
Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA