February 6, 2022

Acts 6-7 (6:8-8:4): Martyr Witness

## *Be willing to work, suffer, and even surrender your life for the cause of Christ.*

*Sermon prayer*

* NEW EvC—Listen with Care
* Events—Women’s Event, Men’s Event, Night to Shine, ACM
* Communion, Lord’s Prayer
* Ricardo Benediction

# Hook—NEW Evangelism challenge (5min)

* *Hannah and I went out for coffee at our local Starbucks. In walked a woman we both knew from our kids’ school. We asked how she was, and she began sharing about some struggles. We asked a few more questions to show we were interested—so she shared more, for about 10 minutes. We didn’t give advice about her had situation but prayed with her, right there in Starbucks. She began crying as we lifted her up to the Lord. When we finished, she asked about church and invited herself to come to service!*
  + LISTENING is so powerful…and rare in our world.
  + Listening is a simple way to care and help people get closer to Christ (i.e. evangelism)

## \*Evangelism Challenge #2—Listen with Care

* + First was PRAYER—don’t stop that one!
  + Go through card and give people time to fill it out.
  + Share your stories—we have done this for years and I have heard some great stories when people have given God 10 minutes to listen to others.

## Overview of today:

* + Stephen, one of the Seven chosen to lead and serve—would be accused, put on trial, and be killed as the first Christian martyr…but not the last.
  + The word martyr means…witness. We are witnesses…

## *\*Be willing to work, suffer, and even surrender your life for the cause of Christ.*

*Prayer*

# Acts 6:8-15 – Stephen’s Ministry (5min)

8Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. 9But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. 10None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

11So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, “We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God.” 12This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

13The lying witnesses said, “This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. 14We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

15At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel’s.

## \*The character of Stephen.

* + Full of God’s grace and power, performed miracles, wise from the Holy Spirit
  + Leader in Jerusalem Church, helped with distribution of food to widows
  + Powerful teacher with great theology
  + Willing to suffer

## \*The charges against Stephen.

* + Blaspheme against God (capital offense)
  + Speaking against the Temple (same charge against Jesus)—Jesus will destroy the Temple (misquoting and misunderstanding Jesus)
  + Teaching against the Law of Moses (not true)—Jesus will change our customs (Greek *ethe*: custom, habit, institution, rite)…TRUE.
* Stephen’s speech is the longest in Acts—Luke gives prominence; this is important.

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# Acts 7:1-53 – Stephen’s Important Speech (15min)

7:1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these accusations true?”

2This was Stephen’s reply: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in **Mesopotamia** before he settled in Haran. 3God told him, ‘Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ 4So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.

5“But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet. 6God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. 7‘But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,’ God said, ‘and in the end they will come out and worship me here in this place.’

8“God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. So when Abraham became the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day. And the practice was continued when Isaac became the father of Jacob, and when Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Israelite nation.

9“These patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in **Egypt. But God was with him** 10and rescued him from all his troubles. And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.

11“But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery, and our ancestors ran out of food. 12Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons—our ancestors—to buy some. 13The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they were introduced to Pharaoh. 14Then Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt, seventy-five persons in all. 15So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did our ancestors. 16Their bodies were taken to Shechem and buried in the tomb Abraham had bought for a certain price from Hamor’s sons in Shechem.

17“As the time drew near when God would fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. 18But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. 19This king exploited our people and oppressed them, forcing parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die.

20“At that time Moses was born—a beautiful child in God’s eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. 21When they had to abandon him, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and raised him as her own son. 22Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action.

23“One day when Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. 24He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. So Moses came to the man’s defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. 25Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn’t.

26“The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. ‘Men,’ he said, ‘you are brothers. Why are you fighting each other?’

27“But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside. ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ he asked. 28‘Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?’ 29When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of **Midian**. There his two sons were born.

* First main theme: God’s activity is not constrained geographically.
* Addresses the idea of cultural customs, or that Jerusalem customs should be the norm for all people.

30“Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. 31When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he went to take a closer look, the voice of the Lord called out to him, 32‘I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses shook with terror and did not dare to look.

33“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for **you are standing on holy ground**. 34I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now go, for I am sending you back to Egypt.’

35“So God sent back the same man his people had **previously rejected** when they demanded, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their ruler and savior. 36And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years.

37“Moses himself told the people of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.’ 38Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God’s people in the wilderness, when the angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us.

39“**But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses**. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt. 40They told Aaron, ‘Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don’t know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt.’ 41So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and celebrated over this thing they had made. 42Then God turned away from them and abandoned them to serve the stars of heaven as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written,

‘Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings  
    during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?  
43No, you carried your pagan gods—  
    the shrine of Molech,  
    the star of your god Rephan,  
    and the images you made to worship them.  
So I will send you into exile  
    as far away as Babylon.’

* Second main theme: True worship is not confined to Temple.
  + Burning bush, Tabernacle, no human building could contain God.
  + Speaking against Temple is not speaking against God or true worship. This is what Jesus did, this is what Stephen did—they would not listen.
* Third main theme: Israel had constantly rejected God’s messengers.
  + Joseph, Moses, God—into golden calf.
  + Their ancestors were sent into exile. Jerusalem would be destroyed, just as Jesus predicted. God gave them so many chances to repent.

44“Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses. 45Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors in battle against the nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it stayed there until the time of King David.

46“David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. 47But it was Solomon who actually built it. 48However, the Most High doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says,

49‘Heaven is my throne,  
    and the earth is my footstool.  
Could you build me a temple as good as that?’  
    asks the Lord.  
‘Could you build me such a resting place?  
50    Didn’t my hands make both heaven and earth?’

51“You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you! 52Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. 53You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

## \*Stephen’s Radical Teaching:

* + God’s activity is not constrained geographically. (vv.2-4, 9-16, 30-38)
  + True worship is not confined to the Temple. (vv.33, 38, 44-50)
  + Israel had constantly rejected God’s messengers. (vv.9, 26-29, 35-43, 51-53)
* The apostles struggled with these.
  + The apostles had been called to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), but they had not left. (Other Christians had.)
  + They had been given the gift of speaking in other languages (Acts 2), yet they were still in Jerusalem, and struggling with the divides that come through language barriers (Acts 6, last week).
* We struggle with these even today.
  + Our cultural (or church) customs are not the same as the timeless commands of God.
    - We can value our traditions without enforcing them on others. Missionaries are learning from past mistakes and allowing locals to lead and contextualize the gospel to their culture.
    - The early church had to learn to separate their culture from clear biblical teaching—the first ones to really do that! Still important!
    - Churches are called to be places that live out the mosaic of God’s children—ethnicity, race, age, income, and more. (Rev 7:9)
      * (note that Stephen was culturally different than the traditional Jews)
  + True worship is not confined to buildings.
    - Sacred spaces are important, but more important—WE ARE THE CHURCH. The Holy Spirit lives in YOU…and we are called to worship together.
    - *I have talked with non-Christians, just coming to faith, and asked if it was OK if I took a hammer and smashed up the walls of the church, broke in the windows, and kicked down the doors. Other than the destruction problem…what would be the problem? They answer it is God’s house. I answer back from 1 Corinthians 6 that the PEOPLE are the real house of God. How are you treating yourself—are you cutting yourself down or worshiping God 24-7-365?*
    - *Pandemic such great lessons—we worshiped outside, inside, in the rain, on the lawn, online, in person, and under a tent. Lives were changed under that tent!! But one thing became super clear—we need to worship TOGETHER.*
  + Don’t reject His message—even when it includes work, suffering, or surrendering your life. We walk with JESUS.
    - Stephen did this and it changed the church, opened doors, and set an example.
    - Early church did this—and it changed their world.

## *Be willing to work, suffer, and even surrender your life for the cause of Christ.*

# Acts 7:54-8:4 – Stephen’s Witness (15min)

54The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. 55But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw **Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.** 56And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”

57Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him 58and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60He fell to his knees, shouting, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” And with that, he died.

8:1 Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of **Judea and Samaria**. 2(Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) 3But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.4**But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went**.

## \*The First Martyr’s Impact

* + Opened theological doors—Christianity not tied to Jerusalem or Temple.
    - Both in his theological understanding
    - And in the persecution that broke out—helped move church to the next region of Great Commission (Acts 1:8)
  + Precursor to later understanding—one does not need to be Jewish before becoming Christian.
    - Cornelius chapter 10, Christians in Antioch, missionary journey chs.13-14, decided officially in ch.15 at Jerusalem Council
    - Reinforced by whole New Testament—especially Paul.
  + Greatly influenced Paul’s life and theology.
    - Many of Stephen’s themes are in Paul’s letters.
    - Paul never forgot this event and how God saved him by grace—to be an apostle to GENTILES (exactly what Stephen was talking about).
  + Was willing to follow Jesus in suffering and death.
    - His final words are almost exactly the same as Christ’s.
    - He inspired many others.

## \*Brief Theology of Suffering

* + We have a lot of helpful therapy for suffering. We need more of a THEOLOGY of suffering.
    - Jesus suffered for us. (1 Peter 2:24—by His wounds you are healed)
    - Christ calls His followers to suffer for Him. (Luke 9:23-27—cross daily, give up life for my sake will find it, not ashamed of me)
    - Jesus suffers with us. (Acts 9:4—why do you persecute me?)
    - We suffer with Him. (Phil 3:10—I want to know Christ and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings)
    - Our suffering matters to God (Rev 6:9-11; 21:4—martyrs crying for justice, God hears; He will wipe away every tear, and then no more dying or mourning)
  + **Are you willing?**
    - **Think back on the themes and lessons of today.**
    - **Surrender to the Lord.**

## Wrap Up / Punch

* + Ajith Fernando does ministry in Sri Lanka, and his father began asking not why are we facing persecution but why AREN’T we facing persecution?
    - “Evangelism provokes persecution while persecution energizes evangelism.” (*Acts*, p.268)
    - As the church rapidly grew in Sri Lanka, which is primarily Buddhist, with much Hinduism, persecution rapidly grew as well.
  + \*North African writer Tertullian (AD 160-225) said, “Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to the dust…the more you mow us down the more we grow, for the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” (*Apology, ch.50)*

## *\*Be willing to work, suffer, and even surrender your life for the cause of Christ.*

* + **Are you willing?**
  + **Start with LISTENING—EvC card.** Take the challenge. Tear down the walls. Be a witness.

*Close in Prayer*

*Bumper Out*

*COMMUNION*

Benediction

* Connect Card, here to talk
* Evangelism Challenge
* Benediction—Acts 1:8