



Sunday School Lesson for October 2, 2005.
Released on September 28, 2005.

"Faithful Servant"

Printed Text: **Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60.**
Devotional Reading: **Isaiah 6:1-8.**
Background Scripture: **Acts 6:8-7,60**

Time: A.D. 32
Place: Jerusalem

Acts 6:8-15

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15 And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Acts 7:54-60

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven,

and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

LESSON AIMS

To explore the account of Stephen's brief ministry and martyrdom.

To teach that there is sometimes a high price to pay for faithful service.

To prepare Christians to take up their crosses and following the footsteps of Jesus as Stephen did.

Introduction

Did you know an estimated 200 million Christians worldwide suffer interrogation, arrest and even death for their faith in Christ? These are real life persecutions that go on all around the world. If you get some time, please read the article, *Three Christian Women Found Guilty By Indonesian Court*. It is a true story about 3 women who were sentenced, Sept. 1, 2005, to 3 years in prison for allowing Muslim children to attend a Christian Sunday school program, according to Compass Direct. <http://www.odusa.org/Display.asp?Page=IndonesiaCampaign>

Stories abound of people who face hardships in life. Sometimes we wonder how we would hold up if life delivered some of the catastrophic blows that some people handle. We eagerly listen to some hint of the source of their strength, and then ask whether we have developed this in ourselves.

Today's lesson presents a servant of God who faced a catastrophic blow. It was a blow that led directly to his death. The story of God's servants is stained with the blood of prophets and apostles who paid the price for speaking the truth, and today's lesson presents this reality in especially vivid detail. The story is not a pretty one, but one that Bible students need to face squarely because the days of persecution for believers are not over as you can see with the above mentioned web article.

Lesson Background

The book of Acts begins the story of the earliest church by focusing on developments within Jerusalem. The theme of "witnesses" in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) demands that this book present a sketch of the activities of the Jerusalem church. So the narrative begins with events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41), providing plenty of information regarding the power behind this dynamic Jerusalem fellowship.

Then in chapters 3 through 5 of Acts come snapshots of the ministry of the Jerusalem church. These focus especially on the powerful actions of God and the way the apostles used those events to proclaim Christ. Acts 6 begins with a description of the necessity of choosing those of Greek background to serve in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1-7). In the process we see two dynamic preachers of the gospel whose ministries Luke (the author of the book of Acts) describes in some detail. These preachers are Stephen (6:8-8:3) and Philip (8:4-40). Stephen's preaching leads to his execution at the hands of the Sanhedrin, establishing him as the first martyr for Christ on record. Philip's willingness to preach the gospel leads him to great success among the Samaritans and to the inquisitive traveler from Ethiopia (next two lessons).

In the book of Acts, the inspired author carefully documents how the first preachers of the gospel, whether apostles or servants in the Jerusalem church, faced their opponents and problems with courage. They refused to compromise the truth about Jesus Christ.

Stephen's Devotion

1. How is Stephen described? What special powers did he have? (vs.8)

Stephen was described as a man full of faith and the Holy Ghost (Acts 6:5). He, along with the other six, were brought before the apostles to be consecrated (prayed for with the laying on of hands). This signified the affirmation, support, and identification with someone and his ministry. These seven men were put over the distribution tasks.

Stephen was a man who had a strong measure of personal conviction and an outstanding gift for expressing his deep convictions in such a way that others, even very hostile people, found themselves unable to counter the divine truth he presented. Being full of faith and power, Stephen did great wonders and miracles among the people (vs.8). He already had God's pardoning grace for Christ upon him (he was full of faith and the Holy Ghost). "Power" indicates that God gave Stephen a special mark of his underserved favor. He empowered Stephen to perform "great wonders and miraculous signs," just as he had done with the apostles. The Lord used these miracles to confirm the message of salvation through himself.

Stephen's Detractors

2. With whom did Stephen first have a major conflict? (vs.9-10)

Stephen's first opposition takes place with the synagogue (an assembly of; gathering place) of the Libertines also known as "Freedmen". They were descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompeii (63 B.C.) and taken to Rome. They were later freed and formed a Jewish community there. The next encounter was with the Cyrenians. They were men from Cyrene, a city in North Africa. The next encounter was with the Alexandrians who were from Alexandria, another major North African city, which was located near the mouth of the Nile River. The last groups mentioned in vs.9 are them of Cilicia and Asia. These were Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

If we look at the beginning of verse 9, "Then there arose...", we can assume that the Jews from these groups started the dispute (formal debate). They no doubt were debating such themes as the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Old Testament evidence that he was the Messiah. As they began to debate openly with Stephen, it was evident they were no match for his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke (vs.10). The Holy Spirit spoke through Stephen as he supplied the answers to their arguments. The Holy Spirit prompted Stephen to use Scripture, only Scripture, and Scripture undiluted by supposed human wisdom. Stephen was a man lead by the Holy Spirit and spoke with Power. See Acts, Ch. 7 - Stephen's response to the high priest.

3. When his detractors were unable to defeat Stephen in debate, what did they do? (vs. 11-13)

It is quite obvious Stephen's opponents were no match for the Spirit of God as He worked through Stephen. Out of their frustration, they resorted to deceit and conspiracy. They secretly persuaded men to say they had heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Now, it is evident these men have proven themselves to be the enemy. They have become devious against the man of God; and against God. They resisted and showed themselves to be rebellious against God's saving truth, of salvation by God's grace through faith. They were unbelievers and had resorted to lying on Stephen and also included others to promote their lies. They had men saying they heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. This of course, got the people, elders and scribes highly upset. They had become so agitated that they took Stephen before the Sanhedrin council.

4. What charges were leveled against Stephen when he was brought before the Sanhedrin? (vs.13-14)

As previously mentioned, Stephen's opponents secretly recruited false witnesses (those who were under the influence of the Sanhedrins and their religious leaders) to spread lies about him. They stated that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against the Holy place and the law; meaning they heard Stephen speak blasphemy against Moses (the law of God), and against God himself. Anyone who blasphemed against Moses and God deserved to be put on trial before the Sanhedrin council.

These charges were very serious - blasphemy was punishable by death. Leviticus 24:16 - And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him....when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall be put to death. These perjured witnesses took their lies even further and added that Stephen blasphemed against the temple. They said they heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (the temple) and change the customs Moses handed down to them. They made no effort to understand what Jesus meant with that statement but twisted it around to suit their own purpose.

5. What did Christ say about destroying the temple?

In John 2:19, the authorities charged Jesus (Mark 14:29, 58) with making a threatening statement against the temple, revealing that they did not understand Jesus' response however, Jesus was referring to his resurrection. John 2:19 (NKJV) reads: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, temple worship in Jerusalem was destroyed and reinstated in the hearts of those who were built into a spiritual temple called the Church.

6. What did Stephen's face look like as he gave his defense? (vs.15)

As the council looked "steadfastly" upon Stephen, his face looked like the face of an angel. Their attention was focused on Stephen. They were attentive, undistracted. The appearance of his face had their unwavering attention. As Stephen gave his defense, he was so full of the Holy Spirit to such a degree that it was evident in his physical appearance. His face shone with a supernatural radiance. The only thing comparable to his face at that time was the face of an angel. This particular verse (v.15) takes my attention back to the beginning of ch. 6 when Stephen was picked as one of the chosen 7. He was distinguished in his purpose for Christ. He was full of faith, power, wisdom and the Holy Ghost.

Stephen's Death

7. What vision was Stephen given prior to his death? (vs.55-56)

In Chapter 7 (vs. 1-53), the scene opens with a question from the high priest. He asked Stephen if all the things he was accused of true. In other words, How do you plead? Stephen did not answer the high priest's question directly but instead provided a detailed defense of the Christian faith from the Old Testament and concluded by condemning the Jewish leaders for rejecting Jesus. Verse 54 gives us their reaction to Stephen's sermon. They were so angry and frustrated, they began gnashing their teeth at him. However, (vs.55)

Stephen being full of the Holy Spirit stared towards heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He shared what he saw with his

opponents. This was the conclusion to Stephen's address - one furnished by the Holy Spirit and Jesus. He did not have to tell the Sanhedrists that God had raised up from the dead the Jesus whom they had crucified and had exalted him to his right hand, as Peter had. He could announce to the Sanhedrin what he was seeing: heaven opened to reveal the glory of God to him, and the Son of Man, the Messiah, appearing in all the infinite power and majesty with which God the Father had crowned him after being the perfect sacrifice for sinners on the cross. This was the one the Sanhedrists had killed and were still opposing. The realization should have crushed them in repentance.

For Stephen personally the vision which was granted him had an entirely different meaning. There was his blessed Lord, his Savior, ready to receive him as his faithful, courageous confessor, ready to honor him and to give him a share in His glory.

8. How was Stephen killed? Why was this method of execution used? (vs.57-59)

As Stephen professed seeing the Son of man at the right hand of God, the people covered their ears and were yelling at the top of their voices as they all ran toward him at once. They took hold of him and dragged him out of the city and stoned him. This type of punishment was used for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16). The Sanhedrists did what stubborn unbelievers always do when they are confronted with the truth that damns their unbelief. They forcibly shut both their physical ears and the ears of their hearts against it. They were so disturbed by the truth that it infuriated them, and subsequently had no intentions of continuing with the trial. Their minds were set on stoning Stephen to death which was equivalent to a mob killing. In their blind rage, they ignored the fact that the Roman law to which they were subject to did not allow them to carry out an execution of anyone (John 18:31).

9. What young man was present at Stephen's death? What was his role in these events? (vs.58)

After Stephen's death, the witnesses took off their outer garments and threw them at the feet of a man who was at the stoning by the name of Saul. He is also known by his Greek/Latin name Paul. Not only was he present at the stoning, he was also in agreement with it (Acts 8:1). A fact that Saul himself will point out as he speaks to a crowd in Acts 22:20.

10. What was the final prayer of Stephen? (vs.59-60)

As they continued to stone Stephen, he called upon God saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He then knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." After he said this, "he fell asleep." This is a New Testament expression for the death of believers. Their death has become a blessed sleep through the atoning death of Jesus, sealed by his glorious resurrection.

As Jesus had done before his death (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed for God to forgive his killers. He knew that they were not fully aware of the scope of their wickedness. They were spiritually blind. Stephen being a true follower of Jesus Christ still showed compassion for their souls. He was able to do this only by the divine

grace which empowered him.

As believers in Christ, we must remember to pray for our enemies; those who spitefully mistreat us. We must also stay true to our faith, and stand on the promises of God as Stephen did, speaking the truth regardless of the oppositions we may face.

Works Cited:

MacArthur Study Bible
Bible History Commentary - New Testament, Vol. 2

Conclusion

Like Stephen, there are courageous servants of God today who stand up and speak the truth, even when the pressure is against them. In some countries Christians are targeted because they are not in the majority, and they pay a heavy price for their faith. In other cultures there are believers who take courageous positions for Christ at work and in the home. Let us be sure to honor those whose testimonies for Christ cost them so much. We can honor them by staying true to the faith. As Paul wrote to the saints in Ephesus, "my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." We as Christians must rely on the Lord's power, the strength of His Spirit, and the force of biblical truth if we are going to be victorious in this spiritual warfare.

Prayer

Lord, help us demonstrate that there are some things worth dying for, and that truth about Jesus is the most important of these. Strengthen us through Christ. In His name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Be thy faithful unto death, and you will receive a crown of life.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Study **Acts 8:4-17** "**Philip Preaches in Samaria.**"

Lesson Summarized By

Veronica Jasper veronica@jesusisall.com