

Words and Deeds: Testify Part I
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 103, Hebrews 11:8-16, Acts 6:8-7:17

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 6:8-7:17. May we come to know and understand and love our great God through the reading of His holy Word. “Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 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, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?” To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’ So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs. Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased.”

Sometimes, a passage of Scripture seems ripped right out of the headlines. It doesn't seem we can go a day without someone arguing viciously about someone, often slandering them in the process. I've heard that our willingness to speak our minds, to speak out in anger against other people, could lead us to a huge split in our country as we divide along political and moral lines. Maybe, maybe not. What this passage shows us is that it's nothing new.

There is a website where you can press a button and be insulted by Martin Luther, using quotes from his books against his detractors. Here's a good one: "I beg everyone who can to flee from you as from the devil himself." Another one: "You seem to me to be a real masterpiece of the devil's art." Protestants and Catholics alike can get in on the fun. When Pope John XXIII was asked, "How many people work in the Vatican?", he answered, "About half." People in the church have a history of not getting along, so it's not surprising that Stephen found himself on the wrong side of some Jewish arguers determined to put him in his place.

But for those of us who know the story, we know it gets considerably worse from here. Arguing for a faithful position on ethics, morality, the Lordship of Jesus – it may require everything of us. And yet there are clear signs that Stephen is prepared for this, and how he testifies is an example for every generation in the church.

Stephen loved the Lord, and the Lord loved Stephen. He's doing great miracles; he's full of God's grace. He's not even one of the apostles; he's a deacon like we learned about last week. He's busy taking care of the food distribution to widows. An important job, but he's not tasked with preaching or teaching or evangelism. Yet here he is, doing wonders that are leading people to the Kingdom of God. He is so wise and full of the Spirit that no one can best him in an argument about Jesus. God is with him...so much that his face looks angelic while on trial.

And that's what I want to talk about first: *Stephen was able to live and die as he did because he knew the love of the Lord.* He knew the Lord was with him. Now we might argue, "Hey now, Stephen had special gifts. Of course he knew the Lord was with him." We don't know if Stephen knew Jesus personally or saw what He did, or if he just believed the evidence and was an early convert. We sometimes think that, being closer to the time of Jesus, seeing these miracles happen, it was easier.

But I'm not convinced that was the case. God has always asked us to follow Him based on His promises, not on some proof of His power – that's what we heard about Abraham this morning from Hebrews 11. The faithful in the Old Testament knew God's love and trusted in His promises, even the ones they didn't get to see fulfilled.

Seeing miracles didn't convince anyone of God's future grace. The Israelites coming out of the wilderness saw God split the sea and walked through on dry land; they saw ten mighty plagues that struck Egypt but left them be. And yet when they got out in the wilderness, they were all like, "God saved us from Egypt just to let us die out here in the desert!" The Pharisees saw miracles of Jesus and were like, "Nope, doesn't count, because you did it on a day we say you aren't supposed to do that." (Even though He did them every day!)

I think the key issue for many of us in living a Christian life, in having the joy of God in our lives, in meeting difficulties with faith and trust, is that we aren't certain of the love of the Lord. If we knew, deep in our hearts, deep in our guts, that God loved us and was there for us, we would live in very different ways. We wouldn't be so afraid. We wouldn't worry what others thought of us. John tells us in 1 John 4:18, "Perfect love drives out fear."

Do you know that the Lord loves you? Really, truly, deeply, so much that you rely on it to get you through each day? This is not an area of judgment; nobody is going to judge you if you don't know that love. It's a matter for instruction, for seeing the truth. If you have believed in the Lord, if you have trusted in Christ for salvation, if you have said, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior," then I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that God loves you, because your love for Him is proof that God has already poured out His love on you and brought you to Himself.

Think of Psalm 103 that we heard this morning. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love...for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him...from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children." Jesus told the disciples in John 16:27, "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." God says in Deuteronomy 31:6, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." That's so important it's repeated in the New Testament in Hebrews 13:5. And there's the very familiar John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Don't take your circumstances as a sign that God doesn't love you. Do you know that if your family makes more than \$32,000 a year, you are in the top 1% in the world for income? Now that money doesn't go as far as it would in other countries, but we still have immense financial blessings. Homelessness in America is at 0.17%, and we do a ton to fight it. That's almost as low as many Scandinavian countries we think are in great shape. In Britain, it's .5%. Russia is 5%. Egypt is at 18%. In comparison to the rest of the world and indeed most people throughout history, we are incredibly blessed. Do we have problems paying our bills, working our jobs, getting everything done? Are we stressed? Yes! But not as much as we are blessed.

The next time you think, "Do I really know enough to share my faith?" or "Will I lose this friend if I try to get them to come to church?" or "Is it worth my job to be faithful at my work?", remember this: God loves you. He has your back. He created you; He knew He would create you before the creation of the world. If you believe and trust in His Son, then you know He has loved you for all time. The rebuke of the world is nothing in comparison to the incredible love God has for you.

Here's the next thing I saw in Stephen's story: *the world fights dirty, but Christians don't*. There's this group calling themselves the Synagogue of the Freedmen. They represent Judaism from a variety of places; from the name, they were Jews who were once indentured servants to pagans but were now free. The places they were from suggest that they were probably men of some learning; slaves in the Roman world were often educated to take care of their master's business dealings. They are tough debaters, but they can't stand a chance against a man full of the Holy Spirit arguing against them in godly wisdom.

So what do they do? They stage a whispering campaign against Stephen. “Have you heard about him? He’s a blasphemer.” They attack who he is. Then after they have the rumor mill started, enough that the Sanhedrin had probably heard about Stephen, they bring him in and accuse him of speaking against the temple, saying that Jesus will destroy it. They take a misrepresentation of Jesus’ words and throw them in Stephen’s face.

But Stephen doesn’t respond in kind. Even when Stephen gets blunt in next week’s passage, he never falsely accuses his opponents; he doesn’t mischaracterize their arguments or attack them as individuals. In fact, at first he doesn’t bring his opponents into it at all. His discussion is on the topic at hand – namely, the question about whether or not he stands against the ways of their forefathers.

The ways of the devil are old; they shouldn’t be surprising. Is it any surprise that when someone can’t win a debate, they attack the person and make up stories about them? No – it’s been happening forever. When we see attack ads on TV during the political season, we’re seeing the same kind of thing the Synagogue of the Freedmen did to Stephen – since the debate about the ideas isn’t working, let’s paint them in the worst light possible.

David French at the National Review said in a recent interview with World Magazine that he thinks the country is headed not for a civil war but a divorce – because a civil war implies that there’s a reason to stay together. As he put it, “America now has negative polarization: You belong to the Republican or Democratic party not because you love Democratic or Republican party ideas, but because you despise the other side.”

This is not the way a Christian should be – not about politics, not about faith, not about anything. We respond to the cruelest attacks with gracefulness and truth. We may have to speak difficult words to hear – Stephen will say them next week – but we also do it with kindness because who knows who might be touched through our witness? If we respond with love for our enemies as Jesus commanded, we may not make a friend today; we may not see a change tomorrow. But who knows what that kindness may affect in them down the road, to know that someone who opposes their point of view can still do so with love and respect?

Especially because we aren’t Christians just for the here and now; we’re in a relationship with God for eternity. When we insult – not just critique, but insult someone made in the image of God, we have stepped over the line. Even when we have been insulted, wronged, maligned, we respond with grace because we are God’s people. Grace is who we are because we are loved by God. Paul says about the true disciples and apostles in 1st Corinthians 4, “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly.” We do that because we know that the harsh word is temporary, but God’s love is everlasting.

Finally, I want to get into Stephen’s defense a little bit. It goes on into next week’s passage, and it might be a little surprising because it doesn’t sound like he’s defending himself at all. Instead, he lays out a history that all of his accusers know – the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons who would be the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. This might seem condescending, but it’s really not.

What he's doing is what will be our closing thought this morning: *Christians see God's hands interweaving into our shared stories*. What I mean is this: God is intimately involved in every aspect of our lives, and the parts of our lives we share with someone else we can use to help them see God's hand at work.

Look at Stephen's sermon again, and you'll notice something. He's defending himself by showing that he holds the fathers of Israel in high esteem, nothing like what the Freedmen were accusing him of. He doesn't speak against them – and in next week's session, he says nothing bad against Moses (which was another central charge against him).

But he also does something else: Stephen takes the whole story of Genesis 12-50 and he makes it God's story of fulfilling His promise to Abraham and Abraham's descendants. He summarizes 200 years of Abraham's family history by showing how God was working the whole time, accomplishing His purposes, achieving His ends. Now the Jewish leadership virtually idolized the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons. They believed that they would be saved because they were the children of Abraham. Stephen steers the discussion away from the forefathers and towards God's hand and plan in the lives of Abraham and his kin.

How might we do that in our conversations with people? Let me give you a simple example. I met Friday with our financial advisor. Over the last several years he's helped us with retirement planning and getting through some of the lean times. Really, the one shared part of our stories is our financial history. That's what we talk about. And I was able to talk to him briefly about how God has blessed the church and how we aren't struggling quite as much as we once were. Was he really interested? Not really. But still, the seeds were planted. Some time when he does have a spiritual question, he knows he can talk to me.

This might seem awkward at first because we don't naturally bring God into our conversations. If it seems forced or unnatural, people do notice. But when you've been aware of God's work ahead of time, when you've been looking for Him, when you've seen Him answer prayer or lift a burden, it's easier to mention. In our modern era, when people aren't very spiritual, telling them directly about God with no warning can scare them away. But when you gently integrate your faith into what you talk about, it will seem less surprising and gives them an opening over time.

The other thing about doing this is that you don't have to be a biblical whiz kid; you don't have to explain everything about your faith all at once – though we should be working to know our faith well! Stephen talks about what he knows, but he's also speaking to some of the most learned men in Israel. Sharing your faith isn't about how much you know; it's about sharing the relationship you have with Jesus with someone else.

Know that God loves you. Know that God doesn't resort to underhanded tactics but calls us to wage our offensive for His Kingdom in godly ways. Know that weaving your faith into your daily story makes you easier to approach, to share your faith moving forward. Keep moving forward in faith with Christ, and He will make you into a disciple worthy of praise.