

***Words and Deeds: Testify Part II***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***July 29, 2018***  
***Psalm 56; Matthew 10:16-31; Acts 7:17-8:1***

Our final Scripture reading this week is from Acts 7:17-8:1. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “[Stephen continued his testimony,] "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt -- we don't know what has happened to him!' That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made.

But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Babylon."

Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him -- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

Most weeks, I try to start off our time together with a story or concept or idea from our time to get us thinking about the relationship between the world of the Bible and our world. But the story of Steven's stoning is so blunt and shocking that there's no way to lessen the blow. We're drawn into the tragedy of it. On the one hand, it's awful. A man attempting to defend the faith winds up dead at the hands of his enemies. It's scary in the extreme. Yet it is also glorious because Stephen lives and dies faithfully, showing us that God's promise is true and He will help us withstand the time of trial. He dies in a fashion worthy of Christ, who warned us that if He faced persecution and death, we as His disciples would face the same thing. This is sad, especially as it kicks off a wave of persecution against the church. Yet Stephen's story is also inspiring as it directs us to both evangelism and self-examination of our faith.

Last week, we learned that Stephen was an awesome deacon, not only serving the widows but doing signs and wonders as he preached the gospel. And a group of Jews who couldn't best him in debate started slandering him, particularly that he was speaking against God and Moses and the temple. In the first part of his sermon that we heard last week, Stephen showed his love for both God and the patriarchs by showing how God was at work in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This week, he hits hard on the subject on which he was accused. He knows Moses' story inside and out. And he has nothing but kind words for Moses. He even interprets the Scripture to say that Moses' killing of an Egyptian taskmaster was his attempt to show the people that God was using him to rescue them. He puts Moses in the best possible light.

The issue for his accusers is that he continually points back to Israel's rejection of Moses and unwillingness to live by the law God gave through Moses – and how they reject Moses just like the forefathers. They think that they are righteous because they have the temple, but God doesn't need a temple; heaven and earth can't contain Him. They are just like their forefathers who persecuted and killed the prophets – and they proved it by having Jesus crucified. Finally, when Stephen claims authority through a vision of God, they've had enough.

And here's the first idea I want to talk about today: *we can either be convicted of our sin and repent, or we can reject that we are sinners and reject God in the process, but there's no other way to know Jesus.* Most of the time, people don't react as violently as the Sanhedrin did. And it isn't like Stephen's words to them weren't provocative – though no harsher than what Jesus said about the religious leaders of the time. But what he said needed to be said. This group had been directly responsible for Jesus' death. They needed to be called to account. They needed to be convicted of their crime. And really, Stephen's words are virtually identical to those that Peter used on the Day of Pentecost. That day, 5000 people came to be believers. This day, Stephen paid the price for their disobedience and disregard for the gospel.

But it is an essential part of how we present the gospel. We can never skip over the fact that without God's intervention in our lives through Jesus Christ, we are traitors to God and rightfully condemned to an eternity apart from Him. **We are sinners.** There is no room for the good news of Jesus without the bad news of our state of affairs without Him.

Over the last few days, I've been with my mom in Indianapolis as she had knee replacement surgery. If you took a look at my mom's knee before the operation, you'd have been utterly convinced of the need for the doctors to go in and do what they did. But no surgery comes without some pain and challenges. And so if she was convinced that there was nothing wrong with her knee, she wouldn't have had the surgery that got her back on her feet. She had to understand why the replacement was necessary in order to go through that struggle.

That's absolutely true of our relationship with God, only for most of us, it's not as obvious as a knee out of whack. We don't have a regular reminder we can physically see or hear. Instead, we have feelings, which can lie to us. Yet every human being knows when we have wronged someone else. We know in our gut that we shouldn't harm others, speak evil of them, be so incredibly self-centered. Yet because we can't feel or touch feelings, we often shove them down and try to ignore them. We get used to leaving with a low level of guilt as part of life.

And we hate being told that we are guilty. As a little kid, what did we do when we got caught with our hands in the cookie jar? “I didn't do it!” Or even worse, if someone was with you, “He did it!” Even mild-mannered people will fight with a boss or a co-worker when accused of something, even if they're totally responsible. In Isaiah 30:10, the rebellion of Israel was described by them saying to the prophets, “Don't prophesy to us what it right. Tell us nice things! Let us keep our illusions.”

But to do that is to betray our role as followers of Jesus. We must speak the truth that sin has a death's grip on us, and only Jesus can release us from its hold. We are not responsible that people accept it as true. We are only responsible for telling them the truth. We don't have to put it the same way Stephen did! And yet our hope in Jesus is based on His taking away the penalty for our sins. While we can love Jesus for so much more – we can love Him as our friend, our companion through the Holy Spirit, our King, our Lord, our shepherd – that relationship starts with knowing Him as Rescuer, as the only One who can save us from sin.

It's a convicting point for us too. Do you believe you are sinner saved by Jesus alone, through His grace alone, by faith in Him alone? That's how you know Jesus. The Sanhedrin knew *of* Jesus but were not saved by Him. We can be in the same position. I don't want to belabor the point, but our modern church has so often forgotten the reason Jesus had to come in the first place. We have picnics and service projects and classes on being better parents and how to manage our money. But there is no church without a cross; there is no Savior without sin. Either Jesus saves us from sin or He does not save us. Make sure you know Him as the One who removes your sin from you and is moving you towards a life where sin no longer masters you.

Here's another thought I want us to pursue today: *faith in our Savior and His salvation allows us to face death with grace*. Stephen appears totally unafraid of his fate. In fact, his final words are a statement of his belief that Jesus is his Lord (“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”) and a request for forgiveness for those who are stoning him.

And what's interesting about his reaction is that he's able to do this, and he's not Jesus. What I mean is this: Jesus prays for His murderers on the cross, blesses the thief who repents, and makes sure John takes care of His mother. But He's the Son of God. We think that He's the exception because He's both human and divine.

But Stephen isn't. He's just a normal Jesus follower. When he asks for forgiveness on his persecutors, Stephen isn't doing it because he absolutely knows that heaven awaits him as Jesus did. But his faith is strong enough that he can do it, and gladly, because he's no longer worried about himself. He is more concerned about the salvation of those who have rejected his testimony, that someday they might come to believe. And as we know, that's exactly what happened to Saul.

Now I think it's fair to say that we don't fear death so much as we fear dying. We do an awful lot of things to avoid pain. The conversation about drug use and abuse often becomes a conversation about law enforcement, when really we should be having a conversation about how we use an immense amount of drugs – legal and illegal – to numb the pain we have. Our nation is full of pain – physical, emotional, spiritual – and we want to deaden it. Pain reminds us that something is wrong, and we'd rather medicate it than face the pain of rooting it out.

We are scared of a long, painful dying process too, and that's not uncommon nor biblically unreasonable. Jesus Himself prayed about this in Gethsemane before His arrest. In the Psalms, David prayed often to be spared the very literal pain of being conquered by his enemies. Job and Jeremiah cried out to God in the midst of their pain. God hears us and more than that, is with us in the midst of our pain. He promises every believer that our pain will not last forever, that He will take us into His Kingdom where there is no sorrow or death or pain.

Because of that promise, as believers, we do not need to fear death, and we can face it with grace. We have God's love and His promise of a new body, a new heaven and a new earth, where He is present with us. And it doesn't matter if we're young Christians or mature Christians. It doesn't matter what sins we've committed – there's nothing bad enough that God will reject us if we have turned to Him. Jesus has said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live even though he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.” The moment of death is merely a passing into eternity, where life is forever changed, and for believers becomes an eternity in the loving presence of God.

I have been in the hospice rooms of the faithful, whose families are faithful, and there is a completely different atmosphere from those who have no hope. A saint who knows they are a saint, who knows Jesus and knows His love and knows that they are going to be in His hands, not out of some naive belief that God just loves everybody but because they've read about Jesus' salvation for themselves and heard it preached and lived out a life changed by it, at death there is peace. There is an understanding that it's not just empty words, but we are going to be with our Creator, who has chosen us, who has cared for us, loved us.

Who knows what fate we will meet? Who knows if it will be tomorrow or two or ten or fifty years from now? Only God. But we can know this: because God has kept His promises in the past, we know He will keep them in the future. So we can commit our spirit into Jesus' hands every day, someday for eternity, but right now in giving our lives over to His will. We can forgive our enemies, those who hurt us, those who wound us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively, because no good comes from holding on to those grudges and grievances. When we forgive, we shine like Christ. The saying “to err is human; to forgive is divine” isn't found in Scripture, but it's true. Forgiveness – undeserved, unasked for, straight up forgiveness - shows God working in us, because that's the kind of forgiveness we receive in Jesus.

Some weeks I'd have more to say, but this is a heavy passage. We don't like it. We don't like thinking about the frailty of life, and we really don't like the idea that we could wind up like Stephen. And yet we need to hear it. None of us is going to escape death. But all of us who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus have another life coming, one without end, one more glorious than we can even comprehend. So don't fear the world and what it can do to us. Trust in the Lord, turn away from your sin and towards Him, and know the peace of God's grace and hope and love both now and always.