

Witness of the Church

by Steve Gallagher

The sermon explores the challenges faced by the early church and the importance of unity and leadership in overcoming them.

Duration: 1:04:32

Scripture: Acts 6:1

Topics: "Martyrdom And Persecution", "Faithful Testimony"

Description

This sermon delves into the life and martyrdom of Stephen, the first martyr of the early church. Stephen's witness through his godly life, bold words, and ultimate sacrifice is highlighted, showcasing the importance of being a testimony for Christ. The sermon emphasizes the reactions that come when living out a faithful testimony, whether positive or negative, and the significance of standing firm in one's faith despite opposition.

Transcript

Praise the Lord. We're already in our fifth meeting message about the early church. Today, it'll be the witness of the church.

So far, Luke has used vignettes and summary statements to give us an idea of what life was like in that early church time. In those first, whatever, two, three, four years, something like that. But if you will notice, everything that has transpired so far has all happened in Jerusalem.

We're going to see that expand out past Jerusalem. Actually, next week, we'll see that. But this week, we're going to see what the Lord used to bring that about.

So things don't always go like we think they're going to go. Sometimes the Lord handles things through the back door, so to speak. Let's open with the word of prayer.

Lord, I just am in awe of your ways. It is amazing to me how you work circumstances in the lives of your people through their lives and in their lives. How you bring things about and even our mistakes.

You find a way to destroy the works of the enemy. You are amazing, Lord. You are amazing.

It's as though everything the enemy tries to do in his malignancy, in his hostility, his hatred of you and your people. Everything he attempts to do, somehow you find a way to turn it around for good, to advance your

kingdom, your message. So Lord, we look again at another story here this morning, and we are anxious to see what the Lord is doing.

We pray that you will make it clear to us and make it real to us. In Jesus' name, Amen. All right.

So the Lord is going to work some things out, but it's going to begin with the problem. Let's look here at chapter 6 verse 1. Now at this time, while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. I want to give some background to this.

What he's describing here is a problem that had arisen in the church, but actually it goes back to the Jewish community. I don't need to tell you that the temple was the center of everything to do with Judaism. It was the focal point, the physical thing that they could look upon and say, here is the center of God's work upon earth, right there in that temple.

It was a huge, huge thing to the Jewish people. But unfortunately, they became extremely prideful over that and other things. So basically what happened over the years, you had two different groups of Jewish people.

You had the Hebrew Jews, he's calling them, who lived in Palestine, mostly lived in Judah, and really mostly lived in Jerusalem. So you had the Hebrew Jews of Palestine, and they spoke Aramaic, and they hated everything to do with the Greek culture. It really was a picture of consecrated Christians today in a certain way.

I mean, if we can keep the self-righteousness out of it. But the Hellenization of the world really is a picture of the spirit of the world. As we will one day see very clearly, it's that movement that the Antichrist will become a part of, and it will propel him into prominence in the days ahead.

So anyway, the Pharisees, what is the word Pharisee means? It's the separated ones. In their minds, they are holding fast to godliness. Well, yeah, in one sense that's true.

But the reality is they were in a horrible spirit, and they were really missing the more important issues to do with walking with the Lord. But from the Judaistic perspective, they were the ones who were very consecrated before the Lord. Then you have the Diaspora, the Jews who had gone out across the Roman world for all kinds of different reasons.

But anyway, they ended up living all over the place, and you see that later in Acts when Paul would go to a city, there would be a Jewish synagogue, and he would go in and speak to the Jewish community that was going there. So they are the Diaspora Jews, the Jews of the dispersion, and they spoke the Greek language primarily, and they appreciated the Greek culture. So they would be more comparable to worldly minded Christians in a sense.

But basically, they were one foot in the Jewish world, and one foot in the Roman world, which was dominated by the Greek culture. That's what Hellenization means. So thousands of these Diaspora Jews had returned to Jerusalem.

One of the things that they believed was that it would be very beneficial to be buried in Jerusalem, so that when the Messiah comes, they would be there as part of the first ones to, I don't know how exactly they saw it, be resurrected with the Messiah or something. But it was like a movement back to Jerusalem. So a

lot of these people would come back to Jerusalem and they lived there.

There were apparently some 500 synagogues spread throughout Jerusalem. Yes, there was the temple, but it played a role in Jewish life, but it wasn't everything. They also had the synagogues, so that's where they would go and meet every week.

So of these 500 synagogues, I don't know, maybe 100 of them were just for these Hellenized Jews who had come back. The interesting thing is, if you go to Israel and you can get past the bus tour thing and get into the Jewish culture there, you see that that same dynamic that was there in the first century is going on today. The names are different is all.

Instead of them being called the Hebrew Jews of the local area, they're called the Sephardic Jews. That's the Jews who either have come from other Middle Eastern countries or maybe even North Africa. But basically, Middle Eastern Jews, and then the European Jews are the Ashkenazi, and they've come in from all over Europe, especially after World War II and the Holocaust and everything.

Anyway, basically, when this move of God swept through Jerusalem in the first century, after Pentecost, hundreds of these Jews are coming into the church. Actually, thousands of them, something like 5,000 by this point had gotten saved, and they're coming from both backgrounds. Now, there's been a real hostility here amongst these two groups.

Even the Jews from Galilee were despised by the Jerusalem Pharisees, let alone what they must have thought of Jews living in Ephesus, or Rome, or wherever. It was that exclusivity, that elitism, that smug arrogance of the Jerusalem Jews, and especially the Pharisees, priests, and so on. That's what was causing the hostility and the reaction from the Hellenized Jews caused the other part of it.

So that was very much in the Jewish culture. I guess in a certain way, this probably isn't a great example, but if you went back to the South back in the 60s, and let's say there was a move of God in Montgomery, Alabama or something, and you have these deeply entrenched prejudices, the whites against the blacks, and the blacks against the whites in the sense of their resentment towards the whites for how they've been treated. Well, okay, so a move of God comes in, and maybe they start combining together in some way, but those things, those feelings are still there.

They've been softened and all that, but they're still there. That's the best way I can think to explain it. Anyway, that's what's going on here.

So there's a problem. There's a tension in the church. Remember, there's been great unity and humility up to this point.

I would say it's still there. It's just that this particular tension between these two groups is causing a little bit of a problem. All right.

So the disciples have to somehow organize and get all this mess together, and that's what they're trying to do, and we're going to see how the Lord uses this problem to establish a pattern for the church of the future. Let me just read a little quote from the biblical expositor. The apostles sought and found daily guidance in the power of the spirit, but they had made no settled plans, had not compared or arranged their ideas, had formed no scheme of doctrine or teaching, had realized nothing concerning the future of the society they were unconsciously building up under the divine leading.

In other words, God's at work in the background, but they're not really clear on what's going on. They're just going from day to day, just trying to survive in a sense. Let me continue.

That period of a few months was a period of divine chaos, out of which the final settlement of the church of God began slowly to evolve itself under the direction of God, the Holy Ghost. So we see that the Lord is involved and we're going to see that more here in a minute. Let's continue reading here, verse 2. So the Lord summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, it is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task, but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Okay. So we had a problem and they're coming up with a solution, but bigger than the solution to this immediate problem is the fact that the Lord is creating a separation in the duties of the church.

There's a lot that goes on involved in running a church or especially a bigger organization. Well, let's say a big church. This was a church of 5,000 members.

So it was a pretty sizable operation. There's a lot that goes on behind the scenes. What's happening here is a separation of duties.

You have the apostles, think of it in terms of church history. You have the apostles representing pastors, and evangelists, and missionaries, and all the ministers that have played different parts, and roles, and functions in the church over the last 2,000 years. Then you have the deacons, these seven men here who represent all the people, the lay people who are in the background administrating this, I don't know, what do you say, this giant machine of God to reach souls.

So you have two different groups. Now, let me just take a couple of minutes to talk about these two groups. The deacons have basically two primary qualifications.

Number one is spiritual, they are full of the Holy Spirit. As saints, they're required to be separated from the things of the world. As men, Paul would later say that their homes must be in order.

As Christians, their lives should emulate Christ. As believers, they should be examples of trust and faith in the Lord. Then later, Paul would tell Timothy in 1 Timothy 3, he would just sum up what it meant to be a deacon.

He said, those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. It was not was only, but is a tremendous honor to be in the work of God, even if it is in the background. I could say that almost all of you fit into this role.

Now, we would definitely say Ed would be the prime example of an administrator, and Carla too and also. But anyway, I'll get off on that here in a second. Because you have the spiritual side of things, but you also have the gifting side.

That seems to be what they're referring to when they're saying full of wisdom. Full of the wisdom to administrate all that's involved with running this operation. It does take a gift.

Well, I'll just say Ed and Carla are very gifted in this way, and it's a blessing to have people like that. You guys, each of you are fulfilling a role in the operation that goes on at Pure Life Ministries. You have some

particular part to play in it all, and you're doing what the Lord has asked you to do, and it's so important.

Well, I'll just leave it at that. So you have the spiritual, which is very important, but you also have the natural endowment, the gifting to be able to operate in some particular role. Like Bill is a tremendous mechanic, something I would hate doing.

Ed is, well, let's say Carla, an accountant. Man, I would rather go sit in prison somewhere than to crunch numbers all day. Man, I can't think of anything more horrible.

But everyone's got the thing that they enjoy doing. I talk to Ed sometimes about crunching numbers, and he gets this starry-eyed look on his face, and just almost a look of ecstasy, a spreadsheet. Wow, man, you've got problems.

But I thank God for people that are gifted in ways that I'm not gifted at. I have certain gifts, but I can only do certain things. It takes all of us together that forms the body.

Amen? So the other group here referred to are the apostles, and there's two primary qualifications here. I'll say that the gifting is they're utilizing the word of God. Now, that is a gift, and there's a reason that men should be called into ministry to be preachers.

It's not for everybody. It's not even a matter of your level of spirituality really, although as we'll see, that's very much part of it. But it's not like just because you really walk with the Lord, that you're called to be a preacher.

It doesn't work that way. There's a gifting involved. For instance, Paul later talks about the scriptures being the power, the effectiveness of them so that the man of God will be adequate and equipped.

He said, study to show yourself approved. There's an aspect of it that a preacher should be spending long hours in the word, because this book right here has all the answers pertaining to life and godliness. It's all in here.

Preachers have to be, I want to say first of all, I don't know if it's first, but definitely at the top of the list, students of the word of God. I know for myself, I want to know this thing inside and out, well, I spend hours every day in the word of God. It's not a chore to me.

I love it. It's like him with his spreadsheet. That's how I feel about the Bible.

I love spending time in the Bible and even in the middle of the day, I spend most of the time in the early morning hours, but even in the daytime, I have another Bible study thing going just to be in the word. I'm not the prime example. There's people who spend a lot more time than me, but let me just say that approaching the word of God, there's the study side to it where you learn all the pertinent background information.

We need to know that. Preachers should be well-versed in all the background sort of things, but also the spiritual side where you are sitting before God with the word of God open to you and allowing the Lord to speak into your heart to get the word into you. So it's not just a head knowledge thing, an academic understanding of scripture, but it's more than that.

It's also living in you, and a preacher should be that way. Well, anyway, I think I'd better just move on from there. For both of these positions, you have the spiritual and the gifting, and that's what I'm trying to bring

out here is that it's both.

It requires both, but the most important is the spiritual. We have got to walk with God. We have got to represent Him faithfully.

That is the most important thing. All right. Now, I want to get on with the story here.

Verse 5, the statement found approval with the whole congregation, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Then he lists the other six, and Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Farmanus, and Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch. I'll just mention in passing this Nicholas.

Arrhenius was a second century disciple of Polycarp who ended up getting martyred. But Arrhenius was a historian, and he said that this man Nicholas began a heretical movement, an antinomian movement, which means licentiousness. It's the mindset that has been in the church from the earliest days, probably from him, it started.

But this mindset that if you're calling yourself a Christian, it really doesn't matter how you live your life. Because if you're a Christian, that's all that matters. It opened the door for all kinds of wickedness to come into the church.

You see Jesus during the 90s, when he's dealing with the seven churches of Asia Minor, and he talks about the Nicolaitans, remember that? He's talking about this culture that they brought into the church of licentiousness. Just do what you feel like doing. Give over, enjoy yourself, call yourself Christian, you're going to heaven.

That's all that matters. It's a horrible, wicked spirit, and it is in the church today in various forms. Verse six, and these they brought before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The word of God kept on spreading. Here's another one of these summary statements. The word of God kept on spreading, and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Now, you might wonder, how could a great number get saved? I mean, that just seems just like, wow, how could it be? Well, the reason it could be is apparently, there were some 8,000 priests and 10,000 Levites. There were 24 different courses of priests who operated around the temple sanctuary. So basically, you had two weeks a year out of the year that you went and did whatever your roles were to do.

Then the other 50 weeks, you just went out and grew crops or made tents or whatever. But that's why there were so many priests involved, because they only worked two weeks out of the year. So there were some 18,000 ministry leaders, I guess you could say, and who were they? Pharisees.

Probably were all Pharisees, maybe all, I don't know, at least most for sure. Later, we'll see that the Judaizers and all the problems they brought into the church, the way they hounded the Apostle Paul, and caused so much disunity in the church. Where did they come from? Probably from this group right here, who came in to know the Lord.

Verse 8, and Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. So in verse 3, he and the other deacons are full of the spirit and wisdom. Then in verse 5, we're told that he's full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and now he's full of grace and power.

Luke can't say enough about him. Luke obviously had heard tremendous things about this guy Stephen, and great name by the way. But anyway, I'll just touch on a couple of these things that is being talked about here.

Full of faith, meaning that he was completely, utterly confident in God. He lived his life that way. He trusted God's character implicitly.

He had an unwavering expectation that God would meet his needs and the needs of the people he ministered to. When he went to prayer, he expected that God was going to answer his prayer. He was full of faith.

He knew the Lord. God was real to him in his daily life, and he believed in God's character. He knew that God was good and merciful.

He knew it with every fiber of his being, and it showed the way he lived his life, full of faith. He was also full of the Holy Spirit. Alexander McLaren brought out some interesting things about this, it's worth reading, that fullness will be a growing fullness.

For our spirits are capable, if not of infinite, at any rate of indefinite expansion, and there is no limit known to us, to the possible growth of a created spirit that is in touch with God, and is having itself enlarged, and elevated, and ennobled by that contact. The vessel is elastic. The walls of the cup of our spirit into which the new wine of the divine spirit is poured widen out as the draught is poured into them.

The more a man possesses and uses of the life of God, the more is he capable of possessing, and the more he will receive. So, a continuous expansion in capacity, and a continuous increase in the amount of the divine life possessed, are held out as the happy prerogative and possibility of a Christian soul. Wow, that is so true.

I'm trying to think what message it was, I was just talking about this, right? Was it in the sermon I gave about crying out for the Holy Spirit, or was it in one of our acts talks? I can't remember, but that's exactly what I was saying. It was, yeah, crying out for the Holy Spirit. When I was comparing it to lust, how lust becomes this driving passion inside you, but you can never satisfy it.

The love for God, the seeking after God, the passion to know God and to be intimate with Him. The more that you give yourself over to that, the more fulfilled, and content, and happy, and joyful you become. Complete opposites.

One a passion of heaven, the other a passion out of hell. I want to be possessed by that. God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and never let us be satisfied with what we have currently.

I want my spirit to be widened, and broadened, and just expanded out, so that I could be full of God, and all that that means. That's my heart's cry. All right, he's also full of grace, which is the Greek word charis.

You know, you've heard of the charismatic movement. Well, charis really just meant gift. I believe that's true, and it's talking about the grace of God, but in this particular context, I think what he's saying is that, let me just put it to you this way.

He had been a recipient of God's grace, a recipient of God's grace, and then as a container of God's grace, he emulated it, or not emulated, emanated it to other people. You know, when other people would

come around Stephen, you just had the feeling of God's grace. I don't know how to put it exactly.

How do you define this? It's a way that you feel around someone who's full of the Lord. They're just, they're gracious, they're loving, they're compassionate, they're good, you know? I don't know. There's something about people like that, full of God's grace.

That's what Stephen was, and whatever it was, it came across as, I think in daily life, just a onesome type personality, although that seems so shallow to say it that way. Let me say this. Whatever it was, Jesus had it, and he had it more than Stephen did, for sure, and something in his face, the little children felt like they could run up to him and be embraced and welcomed.

You know, there was just something about his countenance that provoked that feeling. All right, anyway, verse nine. Oh, and also the power of God.

He was full of the power of God. What does that mean? Well, in his case, he was doing signs and wonders, but for us, that's usually not the case, but the power of God works in different ways. You know, I'm trying to think of an example.

Oh, we just had a girl and her friend come and eat dinner with us the other night. Liz, some of you know her. She worked for us about 10 years ago, for a couple of years, and she was telling some stories that were really a blessing to hear because I remember back on 10 years ago, I'm like, oh, man, I cringe thinking about, you know, what I must have been like, and this girl worked for me for a couple of years, you know, but she starts telling stories about different times when she would be thinking something in her mind, and then I would say exactly what she was thinking, you know, and it just, I mean, only God can do that, and in fact, remember, one of the stories was her first time she came to a service here back in 2002, I guess, and she was sitting in the back, and you know, during the quiet time, we're all sitting there, supposedly, waiting on the Lord, and she said she remembers having the thought in her mind, oh, you know, she was bored.

Oh, I can just let my mind wander around and think about stuff. She had that very thought, and you know, as soon as that quiet time came to an end and we started the meeting, I came up, and I said, don't think that you can just sit there and let your mind wander. This is a time to be seeking God.

You know, I got strong like that, and I just floored her, you know, she was just amazed. Well, that's not, I mean, it's no credit to me, you know what I mean? But that is one way that I see the power of God working, that when God is working through you, stuff like that happens, and you probably aren't even aware of it. Some of you, the Lord uses in that way, and you're just oblivious to it, and you have to be, and I have to be, because we become prideful, you know? But anyway, the power of God, wow, what a tremendous thing.

And I think of also, you know, when talking about the apostate church, Paul would later tell Timothy about those people who have a form of godliness, but resist the power of God. You know, they resist that kind of thing. They don't want God inside them, pointing out things, dealing with them, confronting them, disciplining them.

They don't want that. I can just, you know, whatever. All I know is, Lord, I need all I can get.

So verse nine, but some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, okay, that's North Africa, those two places, and some from Cilicia and Asia,

rose up, remember last week, rose up, the high priest rose up against the disciples. So here, the same thing again, rising up. But let me just point out one thing to you.

Cilicia was a province in what's now Turkey. And what was the capital of Cilicia? Tarsus. And as we're gonna see here in a few minutes, well, actually we won't really see it until next week, but there was a certain young man named Saul who was right in the thick of this whole thing.

And he, considering what his personality was like, just his nature, how driven and passionate, and in these days, he was fanatical. Not in a good way, in a self-righteous, hateful way, he was fanatical. So I could definitely see him being at the front of this group here.

And we can get, if that's true, you get an idea in these next few verses what he was like. The Apostle Paul, that man who was full of faith and grace and love and compassion, all those beautiful fruits of the Spirit, that's the Apostle Paul. But the man, in his flesh, in his nature, was something very ugly.

Let's not have any sentimental nonsense that he was just a great man or just a very lovely man. He was not a lovely man, he was a hateful man. He persecuted men and women, as we'll find out later.

He was full of self-righteousness and this ugly, pharisaical spirit. All right, so whatever involvement he may have had here, it seems as though he did. I mean, all the commentators believe it, I'll say it that way.

Verse 10, but they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the council.

They put forward false witnesses who said, this man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the law. For we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us. And fixing their gaze on him, now, how did Luke know about this? Fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Man, you know, you see in this story, and we'll get into it more next week, but you see the hard shell around Saul of Tarsus beginning to crack. He is seeing something in this man's face that does not add up to what he has learned his entire life, since childhood. He'd been raised in Judaism, like we have been raised in the American church thinking.

It's the same thing. He was raised in that culture. It's all he had ever known.

But here's this man full of faith in God, the reality of God in his life, and speaking these wonderful words that cut across all the things that Saul stood for. And he didn't know what to do with it, probably, but it just kind of drove him into a, you know, increased passion in the wrong way. And yet, he could see something in Stephen's face.

All right, now, chapter seven, which I'm not gonna read, I'm just gonna kind of blow through it real quick. And I wanna say one observation I'll make about chapter seven is you would think he's been brought in before the Sanhedrin, the 70 religious leaders of the land, and he's there to make a defense of himself. And so you would think that he would craft his statements in such a way as to kind of quiet down their fears and, you know, have them see him in a different light.

You know, that's what a defense does. When I was a bailiff in LA, I would sit there and watch these defense lawyers, and they would just craft words and, you know, try to win over the 12 jurors and try to get them to see things their way. Well, that's not what Stephen does.

In fact, he goes the opposite direction. He does practically everything he can to provoke these men. All right, now, he gives this long, I don't know, speech, I'll call it, and it may not make sense to you.

It's like, why is he going into all this? Well, for the Jewish world, he is handling this brilliantly because he's going back and he's tracing their history. This is what they put all their hopes in is, you know, it's, remember the nationalistic mentality the Jews had of the first century, that Judaism is the center of the world and everything has to do with the Jewish people and God's coming to, you know, to the Jewish people. They're supposed to come to the world through them, but that didn't happen.

But anyway, so he, in his speech, is actually, for that time and period, this is a very eloquent speech. It's really well put together. Now, the first 16 verses, something in my tongue, he touches on the land and also the rite of circumcision.

And you'll see that he is touching on all the, not all of them, but most of the main tenets of the Judaistic faith. Circumcision, huge. The land of Palestine, huge.

These things are huge in the Jewish mind. So he begins by telling the story of Abraham, the father of Judaism. And what's one of the points he makes is that Abraham had faith and was justified before circumcision.

He was an uncircumcised heathen from Mesopotamia. So he's showing, just subtly and carefully, but he's showing that it's not circumcision that saves you, it's faith in God. And he's also cutting against this whole glorification of the land of Palestine, because Abraham is from Mesopotamia.

He wanders all over the place. He goes to Egypt, he comes back. And then the other patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, are wandering around.

And finally, Joseph ends up in Egypt, and that's where the Jewish people spend the next 400 years of their life. This is where the nation of Israel is formed, is in Egypt. So he's going against that glorification of the land.

And then next, he gets into Moses and the law, verses 17 to 43 or so. And here again, they have so glorified this man and made him into something he wasn't, and exalted him as the great lawgiver. And Moses, he was a godly man.

And Stephen's not attacking Moses for sure, but actually what he's doing is he's subtly comparing these men in the Sanhedrin with the disobedient children of Israel who resisted everything that Moses tried to do. And he also mentions what Moses said. Moses foretold the day that a great prophet would come.

And he's obviously referring to Jesus there. Okay, then the next section, verses 44 to 50, thereabouts, he starts talking about the temple. The venerated temple of God in Jerusalem.

You know, wow, the temple. Well, you know, Jesus said there's someone greater here than the Sabbath, someone greater than the temple, someone greater than all of these things. And he doesn't say it this way, but he's basically saying that in and of itself, it's just a building.

There's nothing special about that building. And it's not the building that is the point. It's who was inhabiting the building.

And he quotes the prophet Isaiah here in verses 48 to 50. The most high does not dwell in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says. Heaven is my throne and earth is the footstool of my feet.

What kind of a house will you build for me? And so on. You know, so he quotes Isaiah showing them that again, you are venerating this building, making it something that it isn't. When it's not the building, it's the Lord.

That's the point of the whole message that he's bringing forth here. All these things have their place, but they are only a means to a greater end. And the greater end is God and having a right relationship with him.

That's what Stephen is saying to these men. Now, something happens. I don't know if, maybe he's reading it in their faces that maybe they're starting to get angry and he's starting to see it.

Because all of a sudden in verse 51, he changes his tact and he goes in for the kill, so to speak. Let's just read these verses here. You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit.

You are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the righteous ones, the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You who received the law as ordained by angels and yet did not keep it.

Wow, man, you talk about piercing. And he lays it out for them like a prophet of old. And it's all inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Now, I want to read this quote again by the biblical expositor because he brings out an important point here. There is a time and a place for all things, even for the use of strong language. The true teacher will seek to avoid giving unnecessary offenses, but offense sharp and stern may be an absolute duty of charity when prejudice and bigotry and party spirit are choking the avenues of the soul and hindering the progress of truth.

And thus John the Baptist may call men a generation of vipers, and Paul may style Elimas a child of the devil, and Christ may designate the religious world of his day as hypocrites. And when occasion calls, we should not hesitate to brand foul things with plain names in order that men may be awakened from that deadly torpor into which sin threatens to fling them. The use of strong language by Stephen stirred them up to some kind of action.

And the gospel has a double operation. To some, it will be the savor of life unto life. To others, the savor of death unto death.

You know, and that is the truth. Somehow in our lives, we have this graciousness of the Holy Spirit. But when there is a need for a strong direct word, if you are being led by the Spirit, you should be able to do that.

In fact, one of the things Jesus said is woe unto you when all men speak well of you, because that's exactly what the fathers did with the false prophets. You know, what is a false prophet? Someone that has this neediness to be loved by everyone. I can't stand anyone thinking little of me.

I want everybody to love me. And so they go through life and everything is couched and they're diplomatic and you know, everything is presented in such a way so they won't ever be criticized. Woe unto you, Jesus says.

And you know, this man who was full of the Holy Ghost and full of the love of God and the graciousness of God, when it came time to speak directly, he did it fearlessly. But where are the preachers today who will preach the truth to people? It's not easy. I know it isn't easy.

I've done it before, plenty of times, actually. But you gotta do what you gotta do, you know? And the Lord, he has, I don't know, he just, he has what we need to help us to do it in the right spirit, to love people, but to tell them the truth at the same time and not to hide behind some fake graciousness, you know, that never gets outside of comfort zone, a safety zone of wanting people to adore you. It's not the way a man of God should be.

All right, verse 54, we start to see a reaction here. Now, when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and they began gnashing their teeth at him. Or as the Pope of commentary said, they gnashed with their teeth upon Stephen like chained dogs who would bite those who would set them free.

And that is a good way of saying it. And then Stephen, God bless him, but being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, behold, I see the heavens opened up and the son of man standing at the right hand of God.

Wow, what must that have been like for Saul and the others to hear? You know, Saul obviously already saw this look, this otherworldly look in the face of Stephen. Something about him. All he could say is he had the face of an angel, you know? And now Stephen is saying he sees Jesus Christ at the right hand of God.

It's as if all the transient material things of earth just disappeared and there's the Lord. And I tell you, there's something about it because he's about to be murdered here, but I believe this, that when martyrs go into that final few moments as they face their persecutors, I believe that God takes us over. You know, he knows we're about to transition into that other world, praise the Lord.

What an awesome thought. We're transitioning, we're already transitioning. He was already transitioning before the first stone was thrown.

And you know, the heavens are open. How many other people? Carla, I'm trying to remember. Your mother, right? Same thing, Carla's mother, that's right.

I wrote it in a book, I should know. In that transition stage, when she was in her final stages before she died, the heavens opened up. My memory is horrible.

She heard angels, right? Yeah, the heavenly life. Yeah, she saw it. And I believe that, you know, don't fear martyrdom because I know it's frightening in the flesh to think about it, but it will be so glorious.

And you know, once you're going through it, I mean, there's not much you can do at that point, I suppose, but you might as well enjoy it. So he cried out with a loud voice and they stoned him and the people who threw the first stones laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. You know, and this, no doubt, no doubt, this is where his life began its turn.

Because of the blood of the martyr. All right, now I wanna wrap up this, just take a few minutes here before we finish. Stephen was the church's first martyr, although I guess we could say Jesus was.

John the Baptist was martyred, but he was actually not in the church. He was actually the last of the Old Testament prophets, but Jesus was the first martyr. But Stephen was the, you know, as far as we're concerned, the first martyr.

And that word that we get martyr is martyrion from the Greek, and it translates out in the English language as testimony, different forms of a testimony, testify, witness, either noun form or verb form, and also martyr. That's what that word is used as. And if you look back at chapter six, verse three, the description of these seven men, seven men of good reputation, of good martyrion.

That's the word. Isn't that interesting? And I just wanna say a couple things about this word. I'll say that there's three aspects of it.

The way you live your life, the words that you speak, and then the laying down of your life. And you see all of this in Stephen's life. I mean, we've already heard about his godly life in chapter six, and then here in chapter seven is him testifying about the Lord, and then of course laying down his life literally.

So being a witness, what does that mean? Your life, as you live it, whether others see it or it's in private or what's going on inside of you, the way that you are living your life is a witness. It's making a statement. You know, Jesus was the word of God, right? He was the expression of the interior world of God.

God's inside world, as we say sometimes. God's inner man, however you wanna put it. You know, the reality of his character.

And Jesus was the expression of all that God was. And so as that expression, he's called the word of God, the logos of God. And we are called, in a slightly different way, to be the same thing.

We are supposed to be an expression of who God is. The people should be able to see us, the way that we live our lives, the spirit that we are in. And they should be able to sense God's presence, God's character in us, the way that we live.

And you know, the way that we live our lives. Even if no one is seeing what's going on in your life in private, your life, let's just talk about your private life when no one else is around. Your life is either glorifying God or dishonoring him.

Think about it. What goes on in your mind, your heart, your attitudes, and so on. It's either glorifying God.

And I have a feeling that when we stand before him one day, we will see that even in those private moments when we think, well, no one's being hurt by what I do by myself. No, it is affecting the spiritual atmosphere of our realm in which we live out our lives. It is.

Because the enemy will use it against the Lord if he can. And you know, out of that life comes words. If God is indwelling you and living within you, when you get put into certain situations in life, you will not be

able to hold the words back.

You know, if you're full of the Holy Spirit, the words of the Holy Spirit are gonna come forth through your lips, and you are going to testify. We have this expression, I grew up in the Baptist church and we used to go out witnessing. We'd go knock on doors and invite people to church.

It's a great practice if the Holy Spirit's in it. If the Holy Spirit's not in it, it's a terrible practice. You know, like anything to do with the Christian life.

If God's in it, he's gonna use it and we will testify. The words will come forth out of our mouth. That's what it means to witness.

When I first got saved in 1970, you know, I was a drug addict and everything else, but we would go out to Country Club Center, which was a big mall in Sacramento, still there, and we would have tracks and we would just accost every poor person that happened by. We were so excited about the things of God. You know, we would just tell everybody about the Lord.

Well, you know, we were being witnesses, we were testifying, and we did have a testimony of what the Lord had done in our lives, and we were excited, we were exuberant about it. We didn't have any wisdom, but we were exuberant about it. You know, and the Lord used us in some ways.

But that's what I'm saying, it comes out of you. What's inside of you comes out of you. In the right settings.

And everything to do with our lives should be testifying about Jesus Christ. And I'll just blow through some things here real quick. In John 5, His works testify of Him, and also the Scriptures testify of Him.

In Acts 10, the prophets testify of Him. In 1 John 5, the Holy Spirit testifies of Him, and the Father testifies of Him. And I'll just say, for us, everything in our life and our words should be a reflection of Jesus Christ.

A testimony. What is the statement coming forth from our lives? You know, if someone was to read us like a book, follow us around, listen to our words, see our thoughts, just all of it, what is the statement coming forth? Are we making a statement that I love the Lord? I really believe in Him. I am committed to Him.

Is that the statement that we are making? That's the testimony. It's the way we live our lives. And, you know, it really boils down to doing what Jesus said.

If you wanna follow me, deny yourself, pick up your cross daily, and follow me. And, you know, when you do that, there's gonna be a reaction. There are going to be those people, and I could say of all of you in here that have come through Pure Life, that, maybe not me personally, but someone at Pure Life, or me indirectly, whatever, you know, we have expressed our testimony to you, and you have been positively affected.

You've received it unto yourself, and now you have your own testimony that you are giving out to others of laying down your life. But there are other people who are not going to receive your testimony. And you don't always know who's who.

There is going to be a reaction. I remember one time when I was 16, I guess, we had just come to the Lord, and we had gone, we would go into parties and everything, my friend Ray and I. We didn't care, we were fearless. And we'd go all kinds of places to start telling everyone about the Lord.

We were at this one place one night, and I can't remember, somehow we got in our car, and this mob came around our car. I don't know if I ever even told you about this. They were banging on the windows in the car, and you know, I can't remember exactly, but it seems like they were shaking the car, and we were like, well, what's gonna happen to us? But it was one of these kinds of reactions that they did not wanna hear it.

And that's more of a demonstrative thing. For me personally, it's been more of a spiritual reaction or a verbal reaction at times when I've spoken the truth to people, like I told about that girl Liz, when I would say things to her, and she's thanking me all these years later, thanking me because I spoke into her life, you know, because I was more concerned about her than what she thought of me or whatever, and thanking me. But how many people hate me because of that honesty with them? And it'll be the same with you.

If you are really faithful to the Lord, there are going to be those times in your life where you feel it welling up inside you, like Jeremiah said, the word just burning in your heart, and you can't hold it in. I mean, I guess you could stifle it. If you're that concerned about what people think of you, yeah, I guess you could stifle it.

But if you love the Lord, how can you not share the truth no matter what the price may be? And that is the witness of the church. That is it right there. And all the long list of martyrs, I don't know, thousands of people, you know, down through the 2,000 years of church history who have paid the ultimate price, those people had the same thing.

They had a witness of the way they were living their lives. They expressed it to people, and there was a reaction to it through the enemy. And that is what martyrdom has been about all these years.

We are required to have a witness before the Lord, amen? So that's it for this week. God bless you all, and we'll see you next week as we continue our study. ■ Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, amen ■

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