

April 25, 2021 by Steve Brandon



The First Christian Martyr

Acts 7:54-60

1. Anger (verse 54)
2. Vision (verses 55-56)
3. Violence (verses 57-58)
4. God's Grace (verses 59-60)

For the past eight months (since August 30) we have been looking at the wonderful book of Acts. Through it all, I have pressed one theme upon us, which is taken from the words of Jesus: "Be My Witnesses" (see Acts 1:8).

This is what we see the apostles doing. They were witnesses to all that they had seen and heard. They saw Jesus live the way he did, "going about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). They saw Jesus die the way he did, upon the cross for our sins. They saw Jesus, raise from the dead. they even "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41). As a result, they went about in the temple and in the public square telling others of what they experienced in the life of Jesus. And when they were told to stop talking, they said, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). In other words, Jesus had made such an impact upon their lives, that they could not keep their mouths shut, even if they wanted to!

This is the application of the book of Acts for us. The book of Acts calls us to open our mouths and speak with others about Jesus, witnessing to others of what we have experienced of Jesus.

Now, obviously, our experience is different than the experiences of the apostles, who saw Jesus. and heard Jesus. and touched Jesus. and talked with Jesus. We haven't done those things. We haven't seen Jesus in the flesh. Yet, our experience of Jesus, is none the less just as real. I love how Peter describes our experience. "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8-9). Though we haven't seen the Lord, we can witness about our love for him. Though we don't see him now, we can witness about our faith in him. We can do this.

In some regards, Jesus is calling us to take the stand in a trial, and tell the jury everything that we have seen and heard about Jesus. how Jesus has forgiven us of our sins. how Jesus has provided for us in our every need. how faithful Jesus has been to sustain us. My hope and my prayer for you all is that this would be a genuine reality in your life. that you would be telling others of Jesus. This is what a witness is.

Now, this morning as we come to the Scriptures, we come to a passage, where Stephen becomes the ultimate witness, sealing his testimony with his blood. Dying as a martyr for Jesus. In fact, I'm not sure that you know this, but the Greek noun for "witness" is *marturia*, the verb, "to be a witness" is *martureo*, and the word that refers to the person who is a witness is *martus*. What do these words sound like? They sounds like "martyr." Indeed, that's where we get our English word, "martyr." The one who gives the ultimate witness. The witness unto death.

The title of my message this morning is "The First Christian Martyr." My text is Acts 7:54-60. Let's read it now.

Acts 7:54-60

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Let's just walk through this text: First of all, we see ...

1. Anger (verse 54)

That is, the anger of those who heard Stephen preach. When an evangelist is preaching to a crowd of unbelievers, he doesn't always receive a friendly response. Such was the case with Stephen's preaching. Rather than receiving Stephen's message in faith, the crowd responded in anger. We see this in verse 54.

Acts 7:54

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

The listeners were provoked deep within. And their emotions were welling up to this rage. Now, this isn't the first time that an apostle received such a response from his preaching. Back in Acts, chapter 5, Peter received the same response. Acts 5:29-32 records Peter's

message to this same counsel. When they told him to stop preaching, he said, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:29-32).

Peter was simply being a witness of all that he had seen and heard. We saw you kill Jesus. But God has exalted him, granting repentance to Israel, and extending forgiveness to all who would believe! Of course, that is the gospel. That Jesus has died for us, that we might repent of our sins, and believe in his name, and experience the forgiveness of our sins.

Well, look at the response: "When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them" (Acts 5:33). This word for "enraged" is the same Greek word that we find in our text (Acts 7:54). This deep seated anger that boils up so much that it wants to kill. What was only a desire in Acts 5, to kill Peter became a reality in Acts 7, as they killed Stephen.

We see the anger that wants to kill the messenger. Here in verse 54, we see them "grinding their teeth." this is simply another expression of their anger. They hate what Stephen has just told them. He has told them that, who profess their love for the law, actually have never kept the law.

Acts 7:53

you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

Now, before they acted in their anger, We Stephen receiving a ...

2. Vision (verses 55-56)

This is my second point. This is what we see in verses 55 and 56.

Acts 7:55-56

But he, [that is, Stephen] full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Oh, I wish that I would receive such a vision after preaching the gospel. Oh, to look up and see God's glory in the heavens! Oh, to see Jesus in the heavens! And yet, I'm not sure that I would really like to see this scene. Because Jesus is standing up.

Throughout the rest of the Bible, whenever we see Jesus in heaven at the right hand of God, we see him seated. This is what we have seen so far throughout the book of Acts. We have seen Peter preach about Jesus in the heavens, and he is seated. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached that Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of God (Acts 2:34-35). But here, Jesus isn't seated. He is standing. This is a bit strange. Why is he standing? Because something exciting is about to happen. And he doesn't want to miss out.

Have you ever been to a football game, where there is a crowd of people all around you? Do you remember what a crowd is? That's when people used to sit right next to each other, packed together, shoulder to shoulder, with hundreds all around, shouting and cheering? Do you remember that?^[1]

Anyway, have you ever been to a football game, when there is action on the field. and someone is making a long run. What happens? Everyone in the crowd rises to their feet! so that they can see better. to see if he makes a touchdown or not. That's what Jesus is doing. He is standing to get a better view, to make sure he sees what will happen. Actually, Jesus knows what's going to happen, and he doesn't really need a better view. He knows that Stephen is going to score a touchdown by being killed for his boldness in preaching Jesus. Jesus stands to cheer him on. Jesus stands to welcome him into heaven! So that Jesus can say to Stephen, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). That's why I'm not particularly thrilled to see this vision right after I preach sometime. Because, it would mean that my end was near, and that my listeners would soon resort to violence to hasten my end.

But why did Stephen receive this vision? Have you ever thought about that? Obviously, the text doesn't tell us, but I wouldn't be surprised if he did so as a means of grace, to encourage Stephen to stay strong until the end.

Whenever I have thought about martyrdom, whenever I have thought about my own martyrdom, or great persecution against me, like happens in other lands. I often doubt whether I could endure it. Or whether I would give in and deny my faith, because the torture is just too bad to endure. But then, I realize that God's grace is enough to carry me through the moment. and that, God would carry me through the trial, giving me the grace that I would need at that moment. The promise of Philippians 4:19 would certainly be true at that moment, "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

The need of the moment for any Christian experiencing persecution, is sustaining grace, so as to endure the persecution for the sake of Jesus. The need of Stephen at this moment was for the sustaining grace of Jesus. This vision gave him the encouragement to keep running the race. Like the football player, with ball in hand running toward the end zone, hearing his father's voice in the stands, "Keep running Jimmy! Run harder!" Likewise, I believe that this vision of Jesus standing in the heavens, was grace to Stephen, to help him run the course until the end. The end was soon to come soon for him.

In verse 57 we see the violence. This is my third point.

3. Violence (verses 57-58)

That is, the violence of the crowd. In verses 57 and 58, we see how Stephen died. He died by blunt trauma to the head. This blunt trauma came by those in the crowd who threw rocks at Stephen, until he died.

Acts 7:57-58

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Though this crowd did not convene a trial, they had already passed their verdict upon Stephen. He was guilty! and deserving of death! Nothing else would convince them otherwise. That's why they cried out "with a loud voice." that Stephen would not be able to present any more evidence. That's why they "stopped their ears." that they wouldn't hear any more of his talk. That's why the "rushed together at him." that they might kill him quickly.

The behavior of the crowds at this moment reminds me of another Christian martyr: Graham Staines. He was a missionary in India for 30 years. He was born in 1942 in Australia. He arrived in India in 1965, when he was 23 years old. He worked among those with leprosy in India. But some of the Hindu people in India were not happy with him, because many of those with leprosy were coming to faith in Jesus. The Hindus were not happy. They alleged that Graham Staines had forced many Hindus into accepting the Christian faith.

This isn't so unlike Stephen. He was a minister of mercy, providing food and supplies for widows, at a time when many people were coming to faith in Jesus. It's not so much the good deeds that upset the Jews. They were not happy that they were losing their power and influence. So, the time was right for Stephen to be stoned. Likewise, the time was right for the Hindus in India to take violent action against Graham Staines for his missionary activity.

In January 1999, Graham Staines went away to a Christian conference that he attended each year. On this occasion, he took his two boys (Philip aged 10; and Timothy aged 6). His wife Gladys and his daughter, Esther, had decided to remain at home. At the conference the Hindus saw their opportunity.

Because of the cold weather, Graham and his boys were sleeping in his Willy's Jeep. Those who hated the gospel gathered a mob of about 50 people. Armed with axes, they attacked the vehicle while Graham and Philip and Timothy were asleep inside. They set the car on fire. When Graham and his boys tried to escape their burning car, the crowd held the doors shut. And they died. Graham Staines and his two sons died as martyrs, doing good to the people of India.

This is just like Stephen. He was doing good to the people of Israel. And he was hated. A mob stoned him to death.

As I have told you before, when the Jews would stone people, they would often take them to the edge of a cliff and push them over, so that they be injured and unable to run away. Then, those at the top of the cliff would hurl down stones of various sizes upon the victim, until he died. This is what happened to Stephen. He was taken away violently, to a place outside of the city, and pelted with stones.

And in verses 59 and 60, we see how Stephen responded as they were stoning him. He responded with God's grace. This is my fourth point this morning:

4. God's Grace (verses 59-60)

Acts 7:59-60

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen cried out two things. They both were prayers. They were his dying prayers to Jesus. His first prayer was this, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (verse 59). His second prayer was this, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (verse 60).

These prayers were not prayers that he merely thought up on the spot. No, he had been taught to pray these prayers by another martyr that he had witnessed die with grace. That martyr, of course, was Jesus. These words echo exactly what Jesus had said upon the cross.

First of all, we read in Luke 23:46, "Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' and having said this he breathed his last." This is almost exactly what Stephen prayed. He even prayed it in the same way, "with a loud voice."

This teaches us a little bit about death. Each of us have a body and a spirit. They are connected. They are intertwined, so that our body and our spirit are one. And yet, at the moment of death, they are separated. One remains on earth. The other goes to Jesus, provided, of course, that you believe in him. If you don't believe in Christ, your spirit won't go to Jesus. It will go to hell. Church family, believe in Jesus, that at the moment of death, your spirit may go to him!

Second, Jesus said something else upon the cross that Stephen echoed in his words. We read in Luke 23:33-34, "When they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' This is close to Stephen's words in verse 60, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

I believe that these words are words of "God's Grace" that is evident in the life of Stephen. How else could you possibly say these things, unless God's grace was mighty in your life. Indeed, we know that God's grace was mighty in the life of Stephen.

Do you remember when he was chosen as one of the seven to help serve the widows? He was chosen, in part, because he was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3). God's grace was much in his life! And it was evident to all the congregation, that's why they chose him as one of those to help serve the widows. And here, as he was dying, we see his grace on full display. Praying that God would forgive those who were throwing stones at him.

One of the things that I love about this prayer is that it was answered. Do you remember who was in the crowd? In fact, can you name anyone in the crowd? We only know of one person by name. His name was Saul. He was mentioned in verse 58 (a portion of which I skipped earlier).

Acts 7:58

And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Saul was a Pharisee, who was zealous for the glory of God. He was a persecutor of the church (Philippians 3:6). In chapter 8 and verse 3, we see what he was doing.

Acts 8:3

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

The above verse describes what Saul was doing in Jerusalem. In chapter 9, we will see Saul doing the same thing in other places. With papers in hand, he was traveling to Damascus to do the same thing, bringing believers in Jesus bound to Jerusalem as prisoners. That is, until God answered Stephen's prayer. He did not hold that sin against Saul. Instead, he appeared to him on the road, and revealed himself to Saul, forgave his sins, and used Paul to spread the gospel to Gentiles, far and wide. (I look forward to telling you the story when we get to chapter 9).

But we are here in chapter 7, with the story of Stephen. He was demonstrating God's grace in his martyrdom, asking God to forgive those who stoned him. God answered that prayer mightily in the person of Saul.

But here is what I find most interesting. I think that Stephen's prayer has now changed. His desire now isn't for mercy, it's for vengeance. I say this because of Revelation, chapter 6. In this chapter, we see the Lord's wrath beginning to be poured out upon the world, before he would establish his kingdom. John describes it as a series of seals being opened. With the opening of each seal comes some more revelation of God's wrath. In Revelation 6:9, we see the fifth seal opened. And here's what we see.

Revelation 6:9

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

These are the martyrs in heaven. They are seen as being "under the altar." I'm not sure why they are "under the altar." Perhaps there is some connection with them sacrificing their lives for the faith. Just as animals were offered up as burnt offerings on the altar, giving their lives for the sins of those under the Old Covenant, so also are these people seen as a sort of "sacrifice" for the church.

For, indeed, they "had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." They took their stand for the truth of God, being a witness for Jesus (just like Acts is teaching us). And they paid for it with their lives. They are seen in verse 10, praying to the Lord.

Revelation 6:10

They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

This is why I say that Stephen's prayer may have changed, now that he is in the presence of Jesus. Now that his soul is under the altar. Because, no doubt, Stephen is one of those under the altar. Indeed, he was slain "for the word of God and for the witness he had borne" (Revelation 6:9). These souls are praying for judgment. They are praying for vindication.

On the earth, they poured out themselves, giving and serving their fellow man. On the earth, they were witnessing for Jesus. Yet, they were killed unjustly. Now, that they are in heaven with the Lord, they see it clearly. They see how unjustly they were treated. They see how God's holiness and faithfulness demand judgment. And they understand how God says, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay" (Romans 12:19).

Realizing that vengeance in the Lord's they are asking, "How long until you repay? And they are asking, "How long until our blood is avenged." "How long until you pour out your wrath upon those who killed us." I love the answer to their question, because it helps us to understand martyrs from God's perspective.

Revelation 6:11

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

First of all, these martyrs are cared for. They are given a white robe. Again, what this means, I don't know. My guess is that it has something to do with God declaring their innocence. Wedding dresses are white, to indicate the purity of the bride. So, likewise, these martyrs are declared to be blameless and pure.

Then, they are told to wait. The time is not yet come for vengeance. It will come. It's just not quite yet the time. You say, "When will it be time?" Glad you asked, because we have the answer in verse 11, "until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

In other words, God says, "I have more martyrs! Those of you under the altar is only some of them. There are more to come. I know their number. I know who they are. And when they all have joined you in their martyr's death, then I will pour out my wrath!"

I love this verse because it shows that Christian martyrs are not God's plan gone bad. No, indeed, Christian martyrs are honored with white robes, and known by God. He knows who they will be. He knows when they all come to heaven. Only when all of them have been martyred, then and only then, God's wrath will be poured out.

So, think about it. At this time, God's wrath isn't being poured out upon the world with finality. Today is a day of grace. God is extending his

mercy. So, there are going to be more martyrs for Christ. But when their full number is in heaven, God's wrath will come.

And who knows, some of those martyrs may be you. Some of those martyrs may be our young people, who fully embrace the gospel, and follow the calling of God into foreign lands, where the natives are hostile to the gospel, perhaps India or Iran or China or some Muslim country. Perhaps you will do good to the locals, caring for widows and orphans and those with illness, like leprosy and Aids. The locals may come to hate you because of your spiritual influence upon those you serve with your good deeds. They may put you to death for Christ. If so, you will join Stephen and the other martyrs under the altar.

In all seriousness, we all should be ready to die for Jesus. Didn't Jesus say, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"? (Matthew 16:24). What did Jesus mean by "taking up his cross"? He certainly didn't mean to put a piece of jewelry around your neck. He certainly didn't mean to take up a hard relationship. He meant that you need to be ready to carry your cross to the place where they would kill you for being a follower of Jesus, just like Jesus did on the Via Dolorosa on his way to Calvary. In other words, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and prepare to die for following after me."

Does this scare you? This is the cost of following Jesus: that we would willingly join with Stephen, in being bold with the gospel and willing to suffer for it. When Jesus sent out his twelve disciples to witness to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6), he told them, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Why would Jesus say this if it wasn't a genuine possibility? Indeed, tradition has it that all of the apostles were martyred for their faith. And church history is littered with martyrs, those who gave up their lives for Christ.

Stephen may have been "The First Christian Martyr." But there were others in the Old Testament. Jesus said that Abel, the son of Adam and Eve was the first. He was killed by his brother Cain for the sake of righteousness. Jesus said that Zechariah was murdered in the temple by the Pharisees (Matthew 23:35). John the Baptist was probably the last Old Testament prophet. Jesus said that Jerusalem is the city that "kills the prophets" (Matthew 23:37).

But there are others to come. Will you be among their number? Are you prepared to be among their number?

You say, "I'm not sure that I could ever do it." I say, "God gave Stephen the grace to be the first martyr. He will give you the grace if this is what he calls you to be a martyr like him.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 25, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] This message was giving toward the tail end of the COVID-19 crisis in the United States. It has been well over a year since any of us had joined in any sort of crowd. So, this was intended to be a humorous remark.