

Acts 6:8-15 and 7:1-60

I don't know whether you are a fan of courtroom dramas, but if so, the opening few chapters of the Book of Acts will be right up your street. This is the fourth time where followers of Jesus have been asked to give an account for their actions, and the third time that they are asked to do so before the Jewish ruling council – the Sanhedrin. The difference this time is that the accused isn't one of Jesus first disciples, but someone else. In this case it's a man called Stephen.

We came across Stephen in chapter 6, as one of the seven men chosen to take over responsibility for the distribution of food to widows. We were told that Stephen was a man full of wisdom, full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. And chapter 6 verse 8 gives us a little more information about him doesn't it. Verse 8 describes Stephen as a man full of God's grace and power, a man who did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. And as verse 9 and 10 go on to explain, Stephen was also a fantastic debater and a formidable opponent. Some members of the synagogue of the freedmen – they were Jews from other provinces who were now living in Jerusalem – had debated with Stephen about Jesus on a whole number of occasions and they could not cope with his wisdom or the power of the Holy Spirit by which he spoke. Stephen sounds a great guy, doesn't he? He's a godly man, a faithful believer, a confident preacher and a great witness for Jesus.

But these men weren't convinced by Stephen's teaching and they were not content to lose the argument. So they grabbed Stephen and dragged him before the court. And what were the charges against him? The charges were that he had been speaking against the temple, God's house where the presence of God was thought to dwell, and that he had also been speaking against Moses and the law, God's commands given to his people through his prophets. And to speak against God's house and God's commands was tantamount to speaking against God himself.

These two things together explain why they accuse Stephen of blasphemy, and blasphemy, according to Jewish law, was a capital crime. And whilst the Jews needed the Romans to carry out that sentence, as we saw in the case of Jesus, they would use all the powers at their disposal, even underhand tactics if need be, to see that those they thought were blasphemers were put to death. So Stephen was in quite a bit of trouble.

And not only is the charge a serious one, Stephen is also up against a rather biased court. Over the previous few chapters we have seen how the followers of Jesus had been threatened, beaten, commanded to be silent and not speak the name of Jesus. What began as a minor annoyance to the Jewish leadership was now getting out of hand. Perhaps that's why a number of people were prepared to offer false witness statements to testify against Stephen. The cards really were stacked against him and he needed a wonderful defence if he was going to escape death.

I don't know whether you thought his defence was rather strange. Stephen seems to spend 53 verses teaching the teachers of Israel some pretty basic lessons from Jewish history; lessons that they already knew. But what he was actually doing was turning the focus on his accusers. Stephen was putting the leaders of Israel on trial, and accusing them of the things of which he himself is accused.

And his defence was twofold: Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple, the place where God dwelt, but as he went through the history of Israel he showed his accusers that God doesn't just dwell in one place. And secondly, although Stephen is accused of speaking against God's laws and his prophets, he demonstrated that not only have the people of Israel continually rejected God's commands and his

prophets, including Moses, but the leaders of Israel now (that's his accusers) have rejected the one Moses pointed them towards, the Lord Jesus – the promised Messiah.

Let's have a look briefly at those two things in turn to understand how Stephen makes his case.

Firstly then, he showed that God's presence isn't restricted to the temple in Jerusalem.

Those 53 verses in chapter 7 give us a whistle-stop tour of how and where God met with his Old Testament people. Stephen reminded the court that God met with Abraham in Mesopotamia, with Joseph and his descendants in Egypt and with Moses in the desert of Sinai, all before God's people even reached the Promised Land. He also reminded them that God dwelt in the temporary Tabernacle for many centuries before Solomon finally built his great temple in Jerusalem. And when the temple was eventually built, God spoke through his prophets to make sure that the people realised that since heaven was God's throne, and the earth was his footstool, not even the greatest and most glorious building could contain the glory of God!

Stephen's point was that the Jew's devotion to the temple in Jerusalem, glorious and awe-inspiring though the building was, not only served to limit God but verged on idolatry. They loved the temple so much that it had become stumbling block to them, symbolising all their hopes and representing their security, instead of God himself. So when Jesus spoke of 'destroying this temple and building it again in 3 days' in John 6 the Jews were aghast. To the Jews it sounded as if Jesus was planning to remove God's presence from them and steal their hope whereas in reality it was in Jesus that the presence and glory of God were most perfectly revealed! As John's gospel explains, Jesus was referring to a different temple – his own body – and speaking of his death and resurrection, but they were too blind to see. It was not blasphemous of Stephen to point people away from the glory of the temple to the greater glory of the living temple in Jesus Christ – it was blasphemous to do otherwise.

Stephen second point of attack was to reveal that the faithlessness of the current Jewish leadership was completely in keeping with the history of their people. So he pointed them to Moses, the greatest Old Testament prophet of them all and showed how time and time again God's ancient people rejected his leadership and ignored his words.

Through Moses God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, demonstrating his power and might through those 10 terrible plagues as well as through the parting of the Red Sea and the miraculous provision of food and water through 40 years of desert wanderings. God's ancient people saw God's glory amongst them in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. They heard God's voice thundering from the top of Mount Sinai and they quaked in fear – and yet they would not trust God to lead them to safety or bring them in to the Promised Land. They were idolatrous, faithless and rebellious.

And having reminded them of some of the darkest periods in Jewish history Stephen pointed his finger at his accusers and said "you are just like them!" Let me read you verses 51 to 53 again: *"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."*

It was a devastating diagnosis and a powerful accusation. They had accused Stephen of speaking against Moses and God's commands, but he pointed the finger at them and said "you are guilty, not me!"

It isn't surprising how they reacted is it. They were furious. They could barely contain their anger! And when Stephen was given a glimpse of the glory of God, with Jesus standing at the right hand of the father and he burst out in praise, they could hold themselves together no longer. They dragged Stephen outside and stoned him to death.

Perhaps that end wasn't surprising. To go before your accusers with such a forceful rebuttal of their position, looking to make them the accused instead of you was a dangerous ploy, and so Stephen became the first Christian martyr.

At this point it all looked rather grim, and not just for Stephen. The start of chapter 8 tells us that *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judaea and Samaria."* At first glance it looks as if Stephen's attempt to pierce the defences of the Jewish leadership so that they might see their guilt and become followers of Jesus has backfired. The church has grown dramatically over the first few chapters of Acts but now it had been scattered. But look at verse 4 of chapter 8. *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* Stephen had been martyred but the gospel witness of the early church grew as a result! And did you notice that Saul was there, watching and approving? Although he was an enemy of the gospel at the time perhaps Stephen's witness niggled away in his heart and helped him get ready to receive Jesus as his Lord.

What is your response when you hear stories like this? Do they inspire you or do they make you fearful? I guess we would be rather strange people if we are eager to face martyrdom at the hand of an angry crowd, but I wonder if Stephen's bravery and deep trust in the Lord makes you hope you would have the courage to stand up and speak out for Jesus if you ever found yourself in a similar position. I hope it does have that effect. I hope you never have to face that situation, but if you do that it would be your greatest desire to stand firm and trust in God's promises. And I hope and pray I would pass that test as well.

So what are we to take away from this account? How should our lives and thoughts be challenged by what we've heard today? Let me leave you with three applications for us this morning.

The first is simply a reminder of something we hearing a lot from our studies in the Book of Acts; that all Christians are required to be ready to give a reason for the hope they have. That doesn't mean that you need to be able to give a potted history of God's people from the Old and New Testaments as Stephen does here; it does mean that if someone asks you why you trust in Jesus you need to be able to explain. Can you do that? Can you explain why you come here Sunday by Sunday? Can you explain why you believe in the existence of God when so many people today are rejecting that idea? Can you explain why you believe that Jesus, a man who lived 2000 years ago and some 2000 miles away, was actually God made flesh and dwelling among us? Can you explain why his death on the cross is so important to you? Can you explain why you believe that Jesus was raised to life again and why that fact gives you hope in the face of death? Friends, this is no time for casual faith or silent believers. We live in age where doubt and scepticism is on the rise but where more and more people are desperately looking for real hope and we must be able to give a reason for the hope we have. So work on it. Write down your answers and practise them. If you can get your thoughts on those questions down to 1 minute each, you will be well equipped to tell people about Jesus. We are all called to witness. That's number one.

Number two: witnessing will lead to persecution. When you start telling people about Jesus, when you talk about him as the only way to God, when you explain to people that according to the Bible everyone is a sinner who needs to repent, then don't think people are going to like what you say. Jesus himself said in

John 15 verse 20, that if people persecuted him, which they did, then they will persecute his followers. We are all called to witness, but we need to accept that witnessing will lead to persecution. It may not be as severe as Stephen faced. You may not get arrested and taken away by the secret police as happens in Saudi Arabia, Egypt or North Korea, but if you start to tell people about Christ, you will face persecution: from friends, from family, from colleagues, from neighbours, and if you witness on social media you will be attacked by people who don't even know you. But persecution, in whatever form it comes, must be a price we are willing to pay. We have been bought with the blood of Jesus, saved from an eternity in Hell by faith in his precious blood and promised eternal life in his glorious and perfect kingdom. Seeing what God has done for us in Jesus, what price could be enough to buy our silence? All Christians are called to witness to Jesus but witnessing will lead to persecution.

Here's number three- and here's some good news. Persecution leads to gospel growth. That may sound rather counterintuitive, but it has been the experience of the church across the ages. When Christian missionaries were thrown out of China and the state clamped down on Christianity, the church multiplied a hundredfold in 60 years. And that's what we see in this passage as well. Stephen was martyred for his faith and yet not even the death of such a godly and wise man stopped Christians telling others about Jesus. I'm sure they were fearful, but Stephen's death focussed the minds of the early church on the truth of the gospel and the hope they had in Christ. And as a result they spoke more about Jesus and the church grew.

Across the ages the growth of the church has been fuelled by the blood of martyrs, and it is still the same today. What greater witness is there to an unbelieving world, than that we would be willing to be persecuted, maligned, imprisoned, or even killed because we trust in Jesus. And when people see that Christians are willing to suffer for their faith; when they see that Christians won't be silenced by fear but will continue to speak about Jesus and live lives of love and service, even amongst those who hate and persecute them, then that is the greatest witness of them all.

We are all called to witness; witnessing leads to persecution; but persecution leads to the growth of the church and to greater glory for God.

The story of Stephen should inspire us to be ready to witness and to stand firm whatever persecution comes our way. May we do it well, to the glory of God. Amen.