

STEPHEN'S FAITH AND SPIRIT

Acts 7:1-60

Key Verse: 7:59

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”

In the last passage we learned the principle of the early apostles in doing God’s work. They gave their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word of God. It required a definite decision. In the midst of many problems, they remained focused on the word of God and prayer. Then the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. During the last two weeks, many new students have begun one-to-one Bible study on our campuses. They are thirsty for the word of God. It is the time for us to give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. When we do so, may God establish 1,000 one-to-one Bible studies among us.

In today’s passage Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin. They accuse him of blasphemy, punishable by death. It would be a scary moment for anyone. But Stephen is not scared at all. His face is like the face of an angel. His speech is clear and pointed. He gives his life to Jesus joyfully. Stephen is a true and everlasting victor in the spiritual battle. Some people are scared to study this passage, thinking they have to die as martyrs to apply this passage. They are still under the power of death. There is no fear in the faith and spirit of Stephen. There is only glorious spiritual victory. May God teach us Stephen’s faith and spirit.

First, Stephen was full of faith and the Holy Spirit (6:5; 7:1).

What made Stephen great? Acts 6:5 describes him as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen had faith in Jesus. He accepted Jesus’ death and resurrection personally. His sins were forgiven and he received the gift of eternal life in the kingdom of God. Moreover, through faith in Jesus, Stephen received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit is the source of power and wisdom to do great things for God. Stephen was not a superman. It was the Holy Spirit working in him who enabled him to do the great work of God. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for anyone who repents of his sins and believes in Jesus. Each one of us can have the same faith as Stephen and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then we, too, can do great work of God.

Look at verse 1. The high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” He referred to their false charges that Stephen had spoken against the temple and the law. Here we can see the problem of the Sanhedrin members. They saw the temple building, but not the God of the temple. They practiced religious rituals, but did not see God who gave them the law. They were men of practical unbelief. They wanted to argue with Stephen on a human level. But Stephen was a man who saw God. Stephen did not argue. Stephen taught them about the living God. In Stephen’s speech we can learn the contents of his faith in God.

Second, the faith of Abraham—believe God’s promise (2-8).

Look at verses 2-3. “To this he replied: ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. “Leave your country and your people,” God said, “and go to the land I will show you.”’” The history of Israel began when God called one man, Abraham, to follow him. There was nothing special about Abraham. He was an ordinary old man with no child. But God chose him to be the ancestor of faith for his people. This was God’s

grace. God called Abraham by giving him an absolute command to leave everything and begin a new life. It required Abraham to put his trust in God alone and to commit his life and future to God. Abraham did so. But God did not give him anything in his hand. God gave him only a promise. It was a great promise, that he and his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. Through Abraham God wanted to raise a nation of people who would worship God.

Verse 8a says, "Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision." Circumcision was not just a ceremony. It had a deep spiritual meaning to Abraham. It meant the cutting off of human attachments that would hinder God's work of raising a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. It meant sending Ishmael away for the sake of Isaac. When Abraham received circumcision of the heart, he could fulfill God's great purpose. God blessed Abraham and made him a blessing. God gave Abraham a son, Isaac. The promise and the covenant were passed on to Isaac, and later to Jacob and the twelve patriarchs. We believe that God will make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. For this, God has called each of us to be a great servant of God. We must look at God and his great purpose, not at ourselves and our own shortcomings. We must live, not by sight, but by faith in God's promise.

Third, the faith of Joseph—God's good purpose prevails (9-16).

Joseph was a fourth-generation missionary whose older brothers were all corrupt. When Joseph wanted to live a God-centered life among them, they hated him and sold him as a slave into Egypt. Joseph was demoted from being a prince in his father's house to being a slave in a foreign country. He had to overcome the pain of his brothers' betrayal. He had to overcome his attachment to his beloved father. He had to overcome a language problem and a cultural barrier and learn how to work hard as a slave on the bottom of society. In the midst of this struggle, he was falsely accused and forgotten by those who should have helped him out. But God was with him. God rescued him from all his troubles. God gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh and to become ruler of Egypt and all his palace. God's good purpose for Joseph prevailed over all the evil of men. The faith of Joseph overcomes evil with good. Stephen had this faith and looked like an angel amidst evil Sanhedrin members. With this faith, high school students can overcome the evil around them and establish fruitful Bible clubs on each campus. With this faith, they can overcome evil with good.

Fourth, the faith of Moses—a shepherd like Jesus (17-38).

God used Egypt as a womb for his people to increase in number and grow into a great nation. For many years they lived a comfortable and pleasant life in Egypt. But as the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, a treacherous king came to power who mistreated and abused the people of Israel badly. He even forced them to throw their newborn babies into the Nile River to drown. At that time, Moses was born with God's special purpose for his life. God spared Moses by moving Pharaoh's daughter to accept him as her own son. Thus, God made Moses a prince in Egypt, where he received a palace education and became powerful in speech and action.

When Moses turned forty, he made a decision to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, and he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. He thought his own people would recognize him as their deliverer and rally to him and that he would lead them to freedom in a patriotic uprising. But it did not work that way. Moses' people rejected him. Moses had no place to stand. Moses fled to Midian to live as a foreigner with his sons. He lived with a sense of rejection and failure. His human dreams and ambition ebbed away. Forty years passed by. Then an angel appeared to him in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When Moses

went to investigate, he heard the Lord's voice: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (32). Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. In the past Moses was very confident that he could lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. But now he realized that apart from God he could do nothing. At last, he was useful to God and the time came for God to work through him.

God called Moses to be a shepherd for his people. As of first importance, God helped him to have a right attitude toward God. God commanded him, "Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground" (33). Then God taught Moses his shepherd heart for his people. God said, "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" (34).

Stephen emphasizes that the same Moses who was rejected by his people was appointed by God to be their ruler and deliverer. In this, Moses has a common factor with Jesus. God sent Jesus as the promised Messiah to his people Israel. They rejected Jesus publicly and put him to death. But God raised Jesus from the dead. Through his resurrection, God declared with power that Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Messiah (Ro 1:4). Look at verse 37. "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'" Jesus is the prophet like Moses. Like Moses, Jesus is a deliverer and a mediator. Moses delivered the Israelites from Egypt, led them through the Red Sea and then through the desert for forty years. It was not at all possible by human strength. It was possible only by God's strength. God gave Moses power to do wonders and miraculous signs. Jesus came to deliver men from the bondage of sin. Jesus' deliverance was also accompanied by wonders and miraculous signs. Once, a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus for healing. Jesus said to him, "Friend, your sins are forgiven" (Lk 5:20). Then Jesus healed his paralysis and made him walk as the evidence of his power to forgive sins.

As a mediator, Moses was humble enough to understand his suffering people. He was also humble enough to listen to the voice of God on the mountain. He received the living words of God and passed them on to his people. This became the Pentateuch. Now, Jesus is the only mediator between God and men. Jesus is God. But he humbled himself to come into this world to live among men. Because he suffered with us, he truly understands our sufferings and temptations and trials. Jesus also received the living words of God, in fact, Jesus is the Word of God. And Jesus gave the word of God to men. Whereas Moses gave the law to man, Jesus gave God's grace to man. Jesus taught that God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Through Jesus we received the gospel, the good news of salvation. Thus far, Stephen has taught about the great work of God. But there is another side to Israel's history.

Fifth, disobedience, idolatry and exile (39-43).

Though Moses was sent by God, the people of Israel refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. This was not a small decision. When they rejected God they immediately became idol worshipers. Their sin of idol worship provoked God to anger and God turned away from them. They became slaves of idol worship, accompanied by materialism and sexual immorality. Their enthusiasm for their idols surpassed the zeal they had shown for God. They were like people who scream and shout wholeheartedly at a football game, but who have no strength to say "Amen" during worship service. Finally, God punished them severely. Many of them died in foreign invasions and the remnant went into exile in Babylon. Here Stephen is warning the religious leaders that their refusal to obey Jesus would result in God's punishment.

Like the people of Israel, the people of America have a history of rejection and disobedience, especially during the last forty years. In the 1950's it was common for politicians to make their arguments for or against legislation on the basis that America should be a Christian country. Then America changed. In 1962 a crazy woman persuaded the Supreme Court of the United States to prohibit prayer in public schools. At that time, the discipline problems in most classrooms were chewing gum in class, passing notes, and talking out of turn. Now we have to deal with drug abuse, violence and gross immorality. The refusal to acknowledge God is not a small event in history.

Sixth, the Creator God is not confined to the temple building (44-50).

Now Stephen turns his attention to the issue of the Jerusalem temple. By tracing the history of the temple he reveals its true nature and purpose. The temple was built to house the tabernacle of the Testimony which God gave the Israelites in the desert. Its very name teaches us that the primary purpose of the tabernacle, and later the temple, is to contain the word of God. Jesus taught the word of God in the temple. Jesus' disciples stood in the temple courts and told the full message of the new life in Jesus. In doing so they fulfilled the purpose of God for the temple. Look at verses 48-50. "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?'" Stephen urges the religious leaders to see the God of the temple instead of the temple building itself.

At this point, Stephen begins the direct application of his message to the religious leaders. No doubt, Stephen knew he was risking his life. But Stephen did not think of himself. Stephen wanted to please God. Stephen wanted to save his spiritually blinded people from their sin. Stephen probably drew a deep breath. Then he spoke the words in verses 51-53: "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 received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." Stephen plainly rebuked their sin of putting Jesus to death. Here we learn that we must deliver a clear message to the people of our time. We must tell wayward women to repent and become holy nation women by the grace of Jesus. We must tell selfish young men to repent and become shepherds by the grace of Jesus. We must proclaim God's holy purpose to establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in America. We can find encouragement in the words of St. Paul in 2 Timothy 1:8,9. He says, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."

Seventh, Stephen entrusts his spirit to Jesus (54-60).

When the Sanhedrin members heard Stephen's plain rebuke, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at Stephen. But Stephen did not look at the vicious faces of the Sanhedrin members. 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 (55). In the physical world, Stephen was in danger. But in the spiritual world, Stephen was with Jesus and he could see the glory of God. With the innocence and pure joy of the boy Joseph who told about his dreams, Stephen said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (56).

At this, the religious leaders 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 (57,58). But while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (59). It was the moment of death. But Stephen was not overcome by the power of death. He saw Jesus right there with him. He joyfully surrendered his spirit to Jesus. He conquered death and entered into eternal life. His body was wracked with pain, but his spirit went to be with Jesus who crowned him with everlasting glory and victory and gave him inexpressible joy. The love of God so filled his soul that, as he fell on his knees, he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (60). There was no bitterness in Stephen. There was no vengeance in Stephen. There was only the grace of forgiveness in Stephen. He truly wanted his enemies to be forgiven and to enter the same glorious rapture that he himself was entering.

When he had said this, he fell asleep (60). Stephen's body was killed and the religious leaders were still alive. But Stephen's spirit had revealed the glory of God while the religious leaders revealed the evilness of fallen men. Stephen's act of martyrdom was the proof of God's victory over death and that this victory is given to those who live by faith. It became a powerful catalyst in the eventual conversion of a young man named Saul, whom God had chosen as his servant for the next stage of gospel advancement.

In this passage we learned the faith and spirit of Stephen. Stephen's faith was in Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. His faith was rooted and grounded in the God of Israel, the God of history. His faith was not theoretical, it was living, and it gave him victory over all the evil of the world and even over the power of death. We must learn the faith and spirit of Stephen. Then we can testify to this rebellious and disobedient generation that Jesus is living and that God will make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. May God give you the faith and spirit of Stephen.