

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

Acts 6:8-8:40

Key Verse: 7:59

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

The twelve apostles decided to turn their responsibility of business over to others in order to give their full attention to prayer and teaching the word. So they chose seven spiritual men to handle the church business. In reality, these men handled both the church business and the defense of the church. As a result, the word of God spread rapidly. As the church of Jesus grew, it confronted strong opposition. Today's passage reveals mainly two things: (i) Stephen's spirit of martyrdom; (ii) the growing church of Jesus in an adverse situation.

First, Stephen's speech on God's history (6:8-7:53). After the ascension of Christ, while the twelve apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, the Jewish rulers were filled with jealousy. They felt threatened by the growing Christian church. While the number of Jesus' disciples rapidly increased in Jerusalem, their numbers were dwindling. Moreover, a large number of priests accepted Jesus and became obedient to the Christian faith. The Jewish rulers were greatly alarmed. They began to extensively scout out debaters and send them to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (6:8,9). These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke (10). Then they seized him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us" (13,14). This false charge against Stephen was the same one they used to condemn Jesus to death. Now they were using this trick on Stephen to put him to death.

Why did they talk about the temple and the Law of Moses in producing false charges? To the Jews, the temple was the place where God was present, and they thought that the temple of God was exclusively for them. Moreover, the temple was the center of their culture and history. The Law of Moses was also important to them. They thought the Law of Moses was their unique possession. They felt superior to the lawless Gentiles because they had the Law. God intended that they be Bible teachers for

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

the Gentiles. But they failed to be so. Now they were using the Law as a political tool. Stephen was accused of blasphemy in the Sanhedrin courtroom (14). All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, to see if he would be scared to death. But to their dismay, his face was shining like the face of an angel (15). At that moment, Stephen did not think of himself; he thought of God and he thought of his people. He gave them a speech about God's history. He wanted them to know God's great purpose for them. He mentions two persons: Abraham and Moses.

Abraham obeyed God's calling (2-19). Look at verses 2,3. "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.'" When God called Abraham, he had a plan to save and bless the world through one person, Abraham. God said, "I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Ge 12:2,3). God chose Abraham, a 75-year old man with a serious life problem^Öhe had no child. God commanded him to leave his country and his people and go to the promised land. Abraham obeyed God's command. He left his homeland in his old age and went to the promised land. But God gave him no inheritance, not even a foot of ground, nor did he give him a child to inherit his name. Still, Abraham believed God's promise. Stephen told this story to remind them of God's purpose in choosing Abraham. It was to bless all peoples of all nations through him (Ge 12:3b; 22:18), because he was willing to obey God. Later, as he had promised, God gave Abraham a son, Isaac, and a grandson, Jacob. Among the twelve sons of Jacob, Joseph was sold to Egypt because of his brothers' jealousy. But in this was God's providence to bring his people to Egypt and mold them into a great nation (9-16).

Moses obeyed God's calling (20-53). God saw that his people had grown into a great nation in Egypt. God also saw that they had suffered under godless rulers. God called Moses to deliver his people from the hand of the Egyptian king and lead them to the promised land.

When God called Moses, he was already 80 years old. He was used to a family-centered life, surrounded by many sisters-in-law. His 40 long years of hermit life made him a man of few words. Moses had thought he was living in a land of nobodies. But God called this Moses and said, "Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt" (33,34). Moses was afraid to return to Egypt, because he had killed an Egyptian; thus, he had identified himself to be Hebrew-born. This greatly offended King Pharaoh. Also, his own people had rejected him, saying, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" Nevertheless, God sent Moses to them as their ruler and deliverer. It was a very hard command for Moses to obey. But he obeyed God's command anyway. So, in the Bible he is known as an obedient servant. When he obeyed God, God gave him strength to lead his people out of Egypt and to perform wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for 40 years in the desert. On Mount Sinai, God gave his people the Law of God through Moses, so that they could overcome their slave mentality and be raised as servants of God for all peoples of all nations (36-38).

But the people of Israel refused to obey Moses. Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They longed for delicious food and comfortable apartments in Egypt. While Moses went up Mount Sinai, they told Aaron, Moses' spokesman, to make an idol in the form of a calf, and they began to offer sacrifices to it. They did not realize God's purpose for them in bringing them to the wilderness. Later, they brought the tabernacle of the Testimony to the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, and kept it until the time of King David. But they did not realize why they did so.

When God delivered his people from bondage in slavery, he had a great purpose for them. He intended to make them a priestly nation. In other words, God wanted the whole world to overflow with the knowledge of God through them. God wanted to bless all peoples of all nations through them. Exodus 19:5-6 says, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." How great God's purpose for them was! But they did not realize it.

The people of Israel in Jesus' time had the same problem. They also did not realize God's great purpose for them. Neither did they realize the meaning of the temple, nor the meaning of the Law of Moses. They thought that the temple of God was exclusively for them. But the meaning of the temple of God was greater than they had thought. The temple was to be a place of prayer for all nations. Mark 11:17 says, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." What a great purpose the temple

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

had! But the Jewish rulers did not use the temple as a prayer house for all nations; they turned the temple into a marketplace (Jn 2:16). Also, they did not know the true meaning of the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was truly great. But it only set the stage for the grace of God through his Son Jesus. Moreover, they did not know God's purpose for them as a chosen people. God had made them his chosen people so as to fulfill his purpose for world salvation. But they did not know God's purpose for them.

In the course of struggling for survival, they became so near-sighted that they lost the ability to think of the world as a whole. They lost their own identity and the meaning of their existence. They were so bound by the present situation that they did not know what they were doing. As a result, they persecuted the early Christians when they appeared to be a growing threat to their security and comfort. In short, their problem was that they had no sense of history. They only saw present reality with no view of God's history.

Stephen rebuked them for not living up to God's purpose for them. Look at verses 51-52. "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..." Through Stephen's rebuke they should have realized God's great purpose for them and repented. But they did not.

Second, the spirit of martyrdom (7:54-8:3). When they heard Stephen's rebuke, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. At this moment, what did Stephen see? We learn three things from him.

(i) Stephen's faith in Jesus. Look at verse 55. "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." At the crucial moment, Stephen did not look at their faces distorted with anger. Instead, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In short, he saw the kingdom of God. He saw that Jesus Christ is ruling the world standing at the right hand of God. His body was racked with pain because of the stones. He realized that he was dying physically. But he knew that Jesus is God who owns his life. So he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

(ii) Stephen's prayer. Evil men were furious at Stephen's speech. They didn't want to hear anymore, so they covered their ears, yelling at the top of their voices. They rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The stones cut his flesh and broke his bones. Still, Stephen prayed for his people. Look at verse 60. "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep." Stephen was a man of prayer. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed for them exactly as Jesus had prayed (Lk 23:34). Look at verses 59-60. "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ^ÑLord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ^ÑLord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep."

(iii) Stephen's blood. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But they did not have to cry; though his body was killed, his life of faith remains forever influential on earth. His body was killed, but his spirit of martyrdom lives forever in the hearts of God's people. As we know well, the flesh counts for nothing, but the spirit is everything. There are many kinds of great spirits, such as the spirit of giving, the spirit of conquest and the spirit of victory before fighting. But the spirit of martyrdom is the greatest because it expresses one's love for God. Stephen's blood became an unquenchable inspiration to the early Christians, who were willing to die for Jesus' name's sake. Also, his blood begot St. Paul's conversion. Paul, when he was Saul, watched the moment of Stephen's martyrdom (8:1); he heard his prayer and couldn't forget it.

Third, Philip's evangelism (8:4-40). On the day Stephen was martyred, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. Saul began to destroy the church. Because of persecution, the early Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. But wherever they were, they took the gospel with them. The great work of God was done by these scattered Christians. The church transposed from the established church (ecclesia) to the scattered church (diaspora). Before this persecution, the people of Jesus in the Jerusalem establishment were the unit of the church. But now, wherever he may be, one person who believes the gospel of Jesus is the church. These two kinds of churches have existed throughout church history. In chapter 8, the author explains how the church reached out to Samaria and even to Ethiopia.

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

First, Philip evangelized in Samaria (5-25). Philip was not one of the Twelve. He was one of the seven deacons (6:5). He ran for his life to a city in Samaria. There he preached the gospel and healed the sick. So there was great joy in that city. Where there was a work of God, there was great joy. In that city there was a man named Simon. He was a witch-doctor. He was smart enough to handle fearful people with his tricks. He obtained their respect and their money. But when he saw Philip's popularity, he decided to become a Christian. He hoped to buy from the apostles the ability to give the Holy Spirit. Peter rebuked him for his wrong motive (20-23).

The early Christians were desperate because of persecutions. But God was doing his own work. The apostles had no idea to come to Samaria, because they were busy to maintain the church of Jesus in Jerusalem amid persecutions. Besides, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (Jn 4:9). But God sent Peter and John to see about God's work among the Samaritans (14). So the apostles came to Samaria and saw the work of God in Samaritan people. They could not but approve of them as the church of Jesus. In this way, Samaria was evangelized.

Next, Philip had one-to-one Bible study with an Ethiopian (26-40). An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road..." (26). On his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, the treasurer of the queen of the Ethiopians. This Ethiopian must have been one of the seekers who came to Jerusalem to worship God. He was reading the passage from Isaiah concerning the suffering servant Jesus. Look at verses 32,33. "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked the meaning of the passage. Philip told him that this passage was the good news about Jesus. Then the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized. To him, baptism was a declaration to the world that he was a child of God, no longer of the world. As a queen's man, it was an impossible declaration to make. But he was compelled to do so when he heard the good news about Jesus. In this way, the gospel of Jesus reached out to Samaria and Ethiopia. In this way, the church of Jesus survived vigorously in the adverse situation. In this way, the church of Jesus grew and grew, even though kingdoms rose and waned.

In this passage we learn that God does not want us to be miserable

STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

because of our human situations. God does not want us to be near-sighted like the Jewish rulers. God not only wants us to overcome our human situation with faith, but also he wants us to live up to his great and glorious purpose for each of us. Most importantly, Stephen's martyrdom spirit influenced and gave birth to Saul's conversion. God also wants us to have the spirit of martyrdom. May God give us the spirit of martyrdom.