

Stephen: Like Father, Like Son

Saints and Scoundrels – Part III

Acts 7

Introduction

In our last discussion, I talked about the ability, or inability, of Christians to laugh, and the fact that some people think spirituality refers only to people who do not smile; that really deep Christians do not have much fun and laughter in their lives. Then, I gave a few illustrations of believers who did indeed, seem to enjoy life to the fullest; who loved to laugh. I talked of John Walvoord, Chuck Swindoll, and the Christian artist who wanted to use my office before his concert, I thought, to pray; only to discover later, that he had rolled my office with toilet paper! We all laughed about that.

Well, this past Monday, I threw a surprise birthday party for my wife. At about 11:45 that night, I looked out our kitchen window and saw, to my utter amazement, someone had rolled our mini-van during the party. Have you ever seen “Just Married” cars go by? Our van was in much worse shape! There was a note taped to the window that said, “Your sermon was inspiring! Happy Birthday, Marsha! We love you!”

I am glad to hear my sermon was inspiring and I want you to know how much I appreciate the way you showed it!

Also, as an act of contrition or guilt perhaps, they evidently knew of my love of chocolate, and taped to the window, a Snicker’s bar. I just want you to know, this will not do it; this will not make me forget!

I also want you to know, you inspired one of our twin ten year old sons. He excitedly led Marsha and I down the hallway at nearly midnight, opened our

bedroom door, and showed us that he had learned how to roll things too! There was toilet paper all over the master bedroom. And, the next day, when I came home from work, both of my boys had rolled the garage. It was really funny! Whoever you are, you have set such a wonderful example! I want to know who you are so I can, um, thank you! And, by the way, we are out of toilet paper at our house – you owe me.

I am now laying down a rule, my illustrations are never to be literally applied, unless you first receive permission! And you have my permission to roll another pastor’s mini-van!

In our last discussion, we were introduced to Stephen, the first martyr of the New Testament church. We discovered that the scriptures revealed that Stephen was filled with five things; that is, he was dominated or controlled by five ingredients. They included:

- the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3);
- wisdom (Acts 6:3);
- faith (Acts 6:5);
- grace (Acts 6:8);
- power (Acts 6:8).

We discovered that because of Stephen’s testimony to the authenticity of Jesus Christ’s claim to be the true Messiah or God in the flesh, he was violently arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. Within an hour, the light of this godly man would be extinguished by a howling mob of deliriously angry

Israelites. Stephen would become the first martyr, and he would not be the last.

Many of you have heard the story of five men who endeavored to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador with the gospel in 1956. The five men were speared to death instead. Their testimony touched off an incredible response in the United States. Hundreds of young people surrendered to go to those who had not been reached with the gospel because of the testimony of these men; men such as, Jim Elliot and Nate Saint.

Now, forty-five years later, the son of Nate Saint is a missionary among the same people – the Auca Indians. And for the first time, forty-five years after that terrible event, David Saint heard from the natives who threw the spears, the details surrounding his father's death. The natives involved, who are now old men, are now believers. They, for the first time, shared what happened that fateful day. David Saint wrote the incredible story in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*. Let me tell the story.

On January 8th, Dad spotted a party of ten natives on their way to the beach. (The jungle growth is too thick to be able to see the trail, so this chance spotting probably occurred as the group crossed the Tiwaeno River.) At noon, Dad radioed to my mother, "Looks like they'll be here for a Sunday afternoon service. This is it! Pray for us. Will contact you again at 4:30, over and out."

As soon as 4:30 came without word from the always punctual Nate, Mom knew something was wrong and contacted the other missionary pilot. He flew over the beach the next morning, spotting the plane stripped of its canvas covering and one body in the river. Four days later, a weary but tense ground party made up of missionaries, Quechua Indians, and military personnel found the other bodies, identifiable only by their watches, rings, and other personal effects.

The Auca, or Huaorani, killed for various reasons: revenge, anger, frustration, fear. Sometimes it took very little provocation. But they always wanted two things: superiority of force and surprise. In contemplating an attack on the missionaries, they knew they would not have a superior force. Six men with spears was hardly a match for five armed "cowodi". If they killed the "cowodi," they knew they would have to burn their houses, leave their gardens, and flee as they always did after attacks, because they knew that other "cowodi" would come in their "ibos," or boats, and find them. Add to this the fact that five

of the six attackers were just teenagers, not seasoned killers. Under these circumstances, it seems hard to believe there ever was an attack, yet there was.

On Sunday afternoon, when the killers finally arrived, they could see that there were five "cowodi," and that they had guns. We know that the guns, which were primarily intended for protection from animals, were usually kept out of sight. The missionaries had vowed to one another before God that they would not defend themselves against human attack, even in the face of death.

Dyuwi tells me that some of the young attackers, seeing they did not easily outnumber the foreigners, got scared and asked Gikita how they could attack. Gikita said that he would first spear each of the five and then the younger men could finish the job. He sent three women over to the far side of the river to separate the missionaries. This seems to have worked as planned. When two of the women came, two of the men (Jim and Pete, I imagine, since they knew the language best), waded into the river to greet them. Gikita started to rush the three left on the beach but slipped on a wet log under the leaves of the jungle floor and fell. All his spears hit the ground, making a loud noise. The men on the beach turned to see what the noise was, and the element of surprise, the second critical factor, was now also lost.

This was too much for the young attackers, and they started to flee. Gikita called them back, saying, "We came to kill them. Now let's finish it or die here ourselves."

This seems at least half-heartedly to have rallied the troops. Nampa ran across the beach toward the two men in the river, spearing the larger man in the river through the torso. As the foreigner began shooting into the air, one of the two women in the shallow river, Nampa's mother, grabbed the foreigner's arms from behind so Nampa could spear him again.

Gikita says he speared my father first. A second foreigner ran to help him, and Gikita speared him, too. Mincaye said the third man on the beach ran to the airplane, partially climbed inside, and picked up something like he was going to eat it. Mincaye asked why he would do this, and as he mimicked his action, I could see he must have been picking up the microphone to report the attack. Minonga speared him from the back, and he fell out of the plane onto the ground.

During the attack, the “smaller” of the two “cowodi,” who had been crossing to greet the women rushed to a log on the far side of the river and began calling to the attackers in phrases that Kimo and Gikita say they understood to be, “We just came to meet you. We aren’t going to hurt you. Why are you killing us?”

“Why didn’t he flee into the jungle?” Mincaye emphatically asked me. “If he would have fled, surely he would have lived. Instead, he just waited for the native to wade out and spear him.”

Dawa, one of the three women, told me she had hidden in the bush through the attack, hearing but not seeing the killing of the five men. She told me that after the killing, she saw “cowodi” above the trees, singing. She didn’t know what this kind of music was, until she later heard records of Aunt Rachel’s and became familiar with the sound of a choir.

Mincaye and Kimo confirmed that they heard the singing and saw what Dawa seems to describe as angels along the ridge above the beach. Dyuwi verified hearing the strange music, and describes that what he saw seemed like lights, moving around and shining; like a sky full of jungle beetles, similar to fireflies, with a light that is brighter and doesn’t blink. Apparently, all the participants saw this bright multitude in the sky and felt they should be scared, because they knew it was something supernatural.

After the killing, the warriors showed their customary disdain for their victims by throwing the men’s bodies and their belongings into the river.

Now, make no mistake, the martyrdom of Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, and the others was witnessed by the hosts of heaven.

In the story of Stephen, a most amazing thing occurs. An angel does not appear in the sky, but instead, Stephen is able to see directly into the glory of heaven, where he discovers the Lord Jesus Himself standing to greet him and to welcome him home.

The Accusations of Stephen’s Blasphemy!

Before we get to that part of our story however, let us first look at the mock trial of Stephen. Notice Acts, chapter 6, verses 12b, through chapter 7, verse 1.

. . . and they came upon 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, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

The high priest said, “Are these things so?”

Stephen is being accused of blaspheming:

- against Moses;
- against God;
- against the temple.

The Articulation of Stephen’s Defense!

Now, what follows, in Acts, chapter 7, is Stephen’s articulate defense. His sermon, so to speak, can be outlined into several key categorical topics or themes.

Stephen recounts the virtues of the Old Testament redeemers

1. First, Stephen recounts the virtues of the Old Testament redeemers.

Stephen will focus on two Old Testament redeemers – Joseph and Moses. These men were types of Christ; that is, they saved the people, as it were, from death or slavery.

Stephen recounts the violence of Old Testament rebellion

2. Secondly, Stephen clearly recounts the violence of Old Testament rebellion.

The Israelite nation consistently rebelled against the gracious plan of God.

Stephen delivers the stinging verdict concerning the Sanhedrin’s, and the entire nation’s, current rejection of the Redeemer

3. Finally, Stephen delivers the stinging verdict concerning the Sanhedrin's, and the entire nation's, current rejection of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

For the most part, I simply want to read Stephen's sermon, as it will speak for itself. I will stop periodically to offer some commentary. Begin with chapter 7, verses 2 through 5.

And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

"and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'

"Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.

"But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him."

Understand that the reason Stephen is pointing to Abraham at the starting point is that all of these men in the Sanhedrin or the Council, considered themselves to be offspring of Abraham. And being Jews, the truly were. They were proud of being his offspring, but Stephen will point out that they have missed the point of their relationship to Abraham. It was a point of faith. Abraham was a man of faith. They should have been copying that in their own lives, but they would not. Continue to verses 6 through 9.

"But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.

"And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I myself will judge," said God, 'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.'

"And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

"The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,"

Now, you can only imagine the Sanhedrin fidgeting a little at this point. Stephen is pointing out that their forefathers had gotten rid of Joseph because they were jealous and envious of his relationship to the father. In the same way, the chief priests, we are told in Mark, chapter 15, verse 10, delivered up Jesus because of their envy. They were jealous, as it were, of His relationship to the Father. Continue to verses 10 through 19.

"And [God] rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

"Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.

"But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.

"On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.

"Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.

"And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died.

"From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

"But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,

"Until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.

"It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive."

Stephen now introduces Israel's second Redeemer or Deliverer. Continue to verses 20 through 36.

“It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home.

“And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.

“Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.

“But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.

“And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.

(Now, notice this verse.)

“And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.

“On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’

“But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’

“‘You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?’

“At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush.

“When Moses saw it, he began to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

“‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.

“‘I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.’

“This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.”

Now remember, Stephen has been accused of blaspheming Moses. But, far from it, he is equating Moses with the Messiah. Moses, he is saying, is a type of Christ. Both, Christ and Moses, were sent from God; both were rejected by the nation; both were disobeyed by Israel, and yet both, Christ in the fulfilling sense, were indeed the deliverers of Israel. Stephen is not blaspheming Moses, but is saying that Moses was the forerunner of Israel’s divine Redeemer and that the way they treated Moses was the way they had treated the Messiah.

By the way, do not miss this: when Moses, the Old Testament type of Christ, first came to his people, they rejected him. He went away for forty years to the desert of Midian, and married a Gentile woman and had children. The second time he returned to Egypt and presented himself, the Israelites accepted him as their deliverer. In the same way, when Christ first came, He was rejected. He went away only to do what? He called to Himself a Gentile bride. The second time He comes, he will be received by the nation Israel, as they look on Him, whom they have pierced.

Isn’t it interesting that through the centuries, the plan of God has not failed in one item? Continue to verses 36 through 39.

“This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’

“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with

the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

“Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,”

I came to that phrase and I had to stop. What an insightful phrase. Their feet are following Moses, but their hearts are traveling back to Egypt.

May I ask you a question? Where is your heart? Your feet are in church, you are singing hymns, you may have brought your Bible, and you seem to be following the Redeemer; your feet seem to be headed in the right direction, but where is your heart?

Continue to verse 40.

“So they said to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what happened to him.’”

In other words, “Let’s make a religion that fits our lifestyle as we would like to live it.”

Continue to verse 41.

“At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.”

Did you catch that phrase, “. . . were rejoicing in the works of their hands”? That happens to be the description of every false religion under the heavens. All false religions take hope in the works of their own hands; their own works. I talk to people over and over again, who do not know the truth of God’s salvation through Christ alone. The answers I receive are usually something that their hands have done that will hopefully gain merit in heaven. The religious systems of this world are magnificent, beautiful, awe-inspiring. They are the works of human hands. Only Christianity rejoices in the work of Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

What a thrill it was for me to sit in the kitchen of a dear couple this past week, who had visited our church a few times. This mom and dad had both been raised to respect God and religion, but were taught that heaven is for those who earn it. What a joy to show them from the Bible, the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. What a privilege to pray with them both, as they placed their faith in the finished work of Christ alone.

Continue to verses 42 through 47.

“But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel?’

“You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship, I also will remove you beyond Babylon.’

“Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.

“And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.

“David found favor in God’s sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

“But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.”

Now Stephen corrects the theology of the Sanhedrin. He has been preaching the history and now, he will make an application. Continue to verses 48 through 51, as Stephen draws the net.

“However, 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 house will you build for me?’ says the Lord, ‘or what place is there for My repose?’

“‘Was it not My hand which made all these things?’”

Remember, Stephen was accused of blaspheming the temple. Stephen is simply putting the temple in its proper place. He is repeating the prophet’s declaration that God is not all that impressed with buildings made with hands.

However, the Jewish leaders and all the people had long since revered the temple to the point of worshipping the temple itself. God had become an idol who resided in the temple. The glory of God was reduced to stone and mortar; to ritual and incense.

We would never reduce God to living in a building would we? Do you? If you go to church for an hour on Sunday to meet with God, pray to Him, sing to him, and hear of Him, and then, Monday through Saturday never acknowledge Him, then God is some sort of being who lives in the church building. As wonderful as the church building is; as dedicated as it is as a place of teaching, nurturing, singing, praying, growing, and learning; as thrilling as it is to meet here with all those who call this body their family, this building is not where God lives! This building is not the temple of God – you are!

The religious leaders of Stephen's day were focused on the building; the ritual; a self-contained God you burned incense to and offered sacrifice to. As a result, they missed the living Lord; the Redeemer of Israel, who had, only months earlier, stood in the temple and said, "I am the light of the world!"

They were so involved with dead religion that they missed the living Redeemer! And Stephen now goes on to deliver that very verdict! Continue to verses 51 through 53, and notice the change from "our" to "you" and "your".

"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 One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

"you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

In this sweeping statement, Stephen turns the courtroom around. They are on trial; they are guilty of blasphemy; they are guilty of ignoring the scriptures; they are guilty of rebellion against God – they are guilty, guilty, guilty!

Continue to verse 54.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

In other words, with the last bit of self control they had, these leaders of a now deceased religious system began to grind their teeth in suppressed rage and hatred. Continue to verse 55.

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;

You might think, "But God is a spirit, He does not have a right hand."

This expression "the right hand" or "the right arm," is declaring that Jesus Christ is standing in the place of divine authority.

You might also think, "I also thought other verses told us that Christ was seated at the right hand of God, but in this verse He is standing."

Other verses refer to the fact that Jesus Christ finished the work of redemption. He sat down to signify completion. However, that does not mean He is only in the seated position. In this verse, He stands to welcome the first martyr home. But that is not all, continue to verse 56.

and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

The "Son of Man" is Christ's own title to describe Himself as the true Messiah. Christ is not only standing in the place of divine authority, He is divine authority; He is not only representing God, He is the revealed God. In other words, "You killed the true Messiah."

Continue to verses 57 through 60.

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

The Accomplishment of Stephen's Execution!

The death of Stephen set the wheels in motion to accomplish several things. We will only discuss one of them today, so we will pick up the other two in our next study.

The death of Stephen provided a powerful example to all believers

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Look at Acts, chapter 8, verse 3.

But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

An example for people God calls to die for their faith

- God provided an example in Stephen for people He calls to die for their faith.

This is an excerpt from a letter written by Lizzie Atwater to her sister, a few days before she and her husband were martyred in China.

Dear ones, I long for a sight of your dear faces, but I fear we shall not meet on earth . . . I am preparing for the end very quietly and calmly. The Lord is wonderfully near, and He will not fail me. I was very restless and excited while there seemed a chance of life, but God has taken away that feeling, and now I just pray for grace to meet the terrible end bravely. The pain will soon be over, and oh the sweetness of the welcome above!

Dear ones, live near to God and cling less closely to earth. There is no other way by which we can receive that peace from God which passeth understanding.

That sounds like Stephen.

Dr. Paul Carlos was a medical doctor and missionary in the Central African Republic forty years ago. He was martyred by the Simbas. In the New Testament that was found in his jacket pocket, he had written the date and a single word the day before he was executed. The single word he wrote and dated in his New Testament was the word, "Peace."

He was of the tribe of Stephen.

An example for people God calls to live for their faith

- Stephen becomes an example, not only for those called to die for their faith, but for people God calls to live for their faith.

You may not be called to die violently on some sandy beach in Ecuador. You may not be called to die like those who recently were crucified in the mountains of Sudan or hacked to death in Iran. But, every one of us are called to be a living martyr.

Now, follow this carefully. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word for "martyr," is the word "martus". Only four times is that word related to a believer dying for his faith. In every other usage, it refers to people living for their faith. In fact, one hundred sixty-one times in the New Testament, the word "martus" is translated "witness," or "to the testimony of a witness".

Stephen was called to die for his faith. Ladies and gentlemen, you are called to live for your faith. You and Stephen are called by the same word, "martus".

A living martyr is one who has put to death the ambitions of self-interest and the plans of self-absorption and self-sufficiency. He, or she, has executed self-satisfaction as their primary purpose in life. They have instead, declared allegiance to and obedience to the challenge of scripture, that invites us all to, according to Romans, chapter 12, verse 1,

. . . present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God . . .

Ladies and gentlemen, we, in our culture, have been called by God as His martyrs; as His witnesses; to believe and to act upon the life altering motto recorded in Philippians, chapter 1, verse 21,

For . . . me, to live is Christ . . .

May we be nothing less than one large congregation of martyr's who will indeed, live for their faith, until our Redeemer welcomes us home to the glory of heaven and whispers in our ear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/19/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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