**Pastor Tim’s Message Notes 6-13-2021 – Stephen: Victim or Witness**

I was once asked a very thought-provoking question and I would like to pose it to you today. Was Jesus a victim?

To help with this question, what would be a one-word or short description of a victim. Powerless, lack of a choice, involuntary, abused.

Does this describe Jesus and all that He did for us? No. Jesus willingly went through all that He did. Jesus was not powerless. Jesus could have chosen to not go through with what He did.

So Jesus was not a victim. Instead, Jesus was a willing witness. He spoke the truth of God’s Kingdom as the Messiah and willingly offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

Clearly, in this fallen world, there are victims. There are people that are powerless and abused and do not have a choice. Maybe this includes us or people close to us.

But while we may experience being victimized, Jesus invites His followers to not have a victim-mindset. He doesn’t want us to remain victims.

Rather, the Lord desires for all of His people to move to being faithful and willing witnesses for Him in this world. We are all called to be witnesses. And witnesses are called to testify to the truth.

Today, as we continue our journey exploring some of the supernatural events found in the Book of Acts, we find a man named Stephen who was a faithful witness for Jesus. As this text is read and as we hear it together, remember that Stephen was not a victim. He was a faithful witnesses.

We will be reading from Acts **6:8-7:7, 7:44-8:1**

**8Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.**

**11Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”**

**12So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”**

**15All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

**7:1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”**

**2To 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 Harran. 3‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’[**[**b**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+6-7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-27120b)**]**

**4“So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.**

(Before I continue with the reading, I would like to note that Stephen’s actually words are much lengthier. Stephen retraces much of the history of the nation of Israel and how what God was doing amongst them was often rejected. And as we will see, this pattern was continuing). Let us conclude with 7:44-8:1.

**44“Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.[**[**l**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+6-7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-27163l)**] 47But it was Solomon who built a house for him.**

**48“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:**

**49“‘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?
50Has not my hand made all these things?’[**[**m**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+6-7&version=NIV#fen-NIV-27167m)**]**

**51“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—53you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”**

**54When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55But 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. 56“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”**

**57At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

**59While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.**

**8 And Saul approved of their killing him.**

**On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.**

Wow! There is a lot that was happening in this scene.

Stephen was one of the 7 people mentioned in Acts chapter 6. These 7 were chosen to help make sure that the Hellenistic Jews were equally cared for amongst the growing group of Christians, for some of the Hellenistic Jews, the ones that were living outside of Palesine that come to worship the LORD at the Pentecost festival but had remained in Jerusalem, they felt that the needs were not being attended to in the same way that the local Jews’ needs were.

But we quickly know that Stephen’s ministry was not limited to this. He was a witness for Jesus and was boldly proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah.

And we read that some of the unbelieving Jews that were in Jerusalem began to argue with Stephen. Stephen, however, refutes that argument with wisdom from God and this led those opposing Stephen to stir up a crowd against Stephen and then he was seized and taken to a religious kangaroo court.

You may be beginning to see that one of the themes from the Book of Acts is that witnesses for Jesus are not always well-received. But if we love Jesus, we are to be witnesses for Him nonetheless.

This is already actually the third time followers of Jesus were standing trial in the Book of Acts and the fourth if you remember the mocking that came to them on the day of Pentecost, when some said that they must be drunk. There was also Peter & John and then it was the entire group of apostles. And now here it is Stephen. And this would be far from the last trial found in the Book.

So persecution is actually a very normal thing in the Book of Acts.

And what may be surprising is that we see from the Book of Acts that God often uses persecution to help spread the gospel.

At the beginning of the Book of Acts, Jesus told his followers, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

At this point, the Church is still exclusively in Jerusalem. But after Stephen’s martyrdom, the Church spreads all over Judea and into Samaria. The Great Commission of Jesus is beginning to be fulfilled.

Now, you may have missed it, but there was a supernatural event that happens in the midst of Stephen’s long speech. He has a vision of Jesus, right?

Stephen is in the process of being stoned to death and he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The fact that Jesus was not seated, but was standing, is very significant. In that time, when a judge was about to announce a verdict, they would stand. So this vision was a picture of imminent judgment.

And so as Stephen is proclaiming this vision of Jesus, it was a word to those persecuting him that judgment was right around the corner if they do not repent of their sin and turn to Christ.

But how does Stephen respond to this vision? Heprays **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”**

Does that remind you of anyone? Jesus on the cross. Jesus prayed “**Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing**.”

Friends, like Jesus, Stephen was not a victim. Stephen was a faithful witness. Stephen was not powerless. Stephen could have retracted his words and denied his faith, but the love of Christ compelled him to speak the truth of Jesus, no matter the cost.

Stephen knew that as a Christian, his life was not about him anymore. It wasn’t about his ease and comfort and safety and protecting that matters. His life was now all about sharing the good news of Jesus. The love of Christ compelled him.

And how did God respond to Stephen’s prayer? God answered it in a powerful way. For who was there approving of Stephen’s stoning? A man named Saul. And this man, as we will look at next week, became one of the most devoted and influential Christians in the history of the world.

Friends, as we think about this powerful story and its implications for us today, I would like for us to consider this.

**Like Jesus and like Stephen, we must choose to live as witnesses, rather than as victims in this world**.

If we are experiencing being a victim in some way, we must choose to not allow that to become our identity. In Christ, we can find freedom from our experiences of being a victim in this world.

But as Christians, God calls us to live as witnesses for Jesus. This means that we are to testify or share about Jesus as we go through life.

As we live as excited followers of our Lord Jesus, His love will compel us to share Him with others. And sometimes, it is not always well received.

But do not let fear hold you back from sharing Jesus.

**Jesus said in Luke 12:4** "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.**”**

In this world, there is such an emphasis on physical safety. Stay home and stay safe, right? We’ve all heard that quite a bit.

But as Christians, was must learn that physical safety is overrated. One of the men in a men’s group that I was a part of years ago said on more than one occasion, “**we are all terminal**.”

In other words, as healthy and strong as some of us may feel, we are not guaranteed another day in these tents, these physical bodies that the Lord has given us.

Our life is far more than this physical life. Jesus said that “**all who believe in Me will never die**.” True death is separating from our loving Triune God. As followers of Jesus, we never experience this.

I would also like to leave you with this. When we go through challenges in this world, please do not let it slow you down from being a witness for Jesus. When we are sick, when we are struggling, when we are going through difficult times, as we continue to proclaim the goodness of God and the truth of the gospel, it is especially powerful. So do not waste those opportunities. Stephen didn’t waste his.

And like Stephen, may we pray for those who may be rejecting our witness, that their eyes would be opened to the truth and that God would have mercy on them as well.

Let’s pray…

Resources: English Bible: Acts – Fall 2021 – Instructor Dr. H. Douglas Buckwalter

[Luke 12:4 I tell you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. (biblehub.com)](https://biblehub.com/luke/12-4.htm)

BibleGateway.com