

Sunday Lesson – April 18, 2021

GOSPEL: Acts 6:1 – 7:2a; 44 - 60

Stephen's Witness

Background

“Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to be responsible over the distribution of food to widows in the early church after a dispute arose and the apostles recognized they needed help. He was also “full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.” Opposition arose, but the men who argued with Stephen were no match for the wisdom given him by the Holy Spirit. So, the men decided to falsely accuse Stephen, labeling him a blasphemer and having him arrested.” (*Excerpts from gotquestions.org/life-Stephen.html/*)

Insight

“For Israel, Stephen’s death meant condemnation. This was their third murder: they had permitted John the Baptist to be killed; they had asked for Jesus to be killed; and now they were killing Stephen themselves. When they allowed Herod to kill John, the Jews sinned against God the Father who had sent John. When they asked Pilate to crucify Jesus, they sinned against God the Son. When they stoned Stephen, Israel sinned against the Holy Spirit who was working in and through the apostles. Jesus said that this sin could never be forgiven. Judgment finally came in AD 70 when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.” (*Excerpts from The Wiersbe Bible Commentary, Acts 7, page 346*)

Gospel Reading

“During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers—“Hellenists”—toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being



discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.” The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose—Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, a convert from Antioch. Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task. The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith. Stephen, brimming with God’s grace and energy, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them. But then some men from the meeting place whose membership was made up of freed slaves, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and some others from Cilicia and Asia, went up against him trying to argue him down. But they were no match for his wisdom and spirit when he spoke. So in secret they bribed men to lie: “We heard him cursing Moses and God.” That stirred up the people, the religious leaders, and religion scholars. They grabbed Stephen and took him before the High Council. They put forward their bribed witnesses to testify: “This man talks nonstop against this Holy Place and God’s Law. We even heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would tear this place down and throw out all the customs Moses gave us.” As all those who sat on the High Council looked at Stephen, they found they couldn’t take their eyes off him—his face was like the face of an angel!

7Then the Chief Priest said, “What do you have to say for yourself?” Stephen replied, “Friends, fathers, and brothers, the

God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was still in Mesopotamia, before the move to Haran, and told him, 'Leave your country and family and go to the land I'll show you.' "And all this time our ancestors had a tent shrine for true worship, made to the exact specifications God provided Moses. They had it with them as they followed Joshua, when God cleared the land of pagans, and still had it right down to the time of David. David asked God for a permanent place for worship. But Solomon built it. "Yet that doesn't mean that Most High God lives in a building made by carpenters and masons. The prophet Isaiah put it well when he wrote, "Heaven is my throne room; I rest my feet on earth. So what kind of house will you build me?" says God. "Where I can get away and relax? It's already built, and I built it." "And you continue, so bullheaded! Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears! Deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors. Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment? Your ancestors killed anyone who dared talk about the coming of the Just One. And you've kept up the family tradition—traitors and murderers, all of you. You had God's Law handed to you by angels—gift-wrapped!—and you squandered it!" At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. He said, "Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!" Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them. As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words. Then he died. Saul was right there, congratulating the killers." The Message

What It Could Mean?

"Stephen challenges Solomon's decision to build a Temple. Quoting Isaiah 66:1-2a, he asserts that God does not live "in what is made by human hands." Through Stephen, Luke implies here that the Temple building constitutes a kind of idol.

Stephen accuses his mixed Jewish audience of betraying and murdering the prophets and Jesus, an ongoing argument in Acts. His speech reflects the insider rhetoric of Luke's audience as they interpret the hostility experienced from fellow Jews.

The crowd is already enraged when Stephen announces Jesus standing at God's right hand. Stephen's deliberate calm here contrasts with the crowd rushing at him with uncontrolled fury. Even as they stone him—the equivalent of a lynching rather than a state-sanctioned execution—Stephen quietly takes a knee. Then, echoing Jesus, Stephen speaks words of forgiveness and relinquishes his spirit. Stephen's final protest marks him as a faithful witness, a martyr. His final posture echoes others in today's society, who raise their voices in a jeremiad for justice and who, in face of societal rage, take a knee." (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org by Margaret Aymer*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Colossians 3: 2-3](#) "Set your minds on things above..."

Thought for the Day – Amazing Grace

"May you always be...A mind through which Christ thinks. A heart through which Christ loves. A voice through which Christ speaks. A hand through which Christ helps." ~ *Unknown*

A Prayer

Holy Giver and Receiver of life, your martyr, Stephen, shined with the light of your Holy Spirit. When his opponents took his life, he offered up his spirit to you, and prayed mercy for theirs. Make Stephen an example of faith and courage for all your followers, for the sake of the one who brought light and life to this world, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**