

A man named Stephen

Have someone read Acts 6, mention briefly what Stephen says in Acts 7:1- 50, then have someone read Acts 7:51-60.

We don't know a whole lot about this man named Stephen. When I first thought about doing this sermon today, what I knew about Stephen was that he was the one who was stoned by the Jews because they couldn't handle what he said to them about themselves, that when he was being accused by the Jews, his face shone like that of an angel, and that a man named Saul was looking on as Stephen was being stoned, approving of his murder. When I looked into this passage more closely however, I see that Stephen was a man who was filled with the Holy Spirit, a man who displayed extraordinary courage in the face of extreme persecution, and a man who, just like his Master, asked for forgiveness for his killers at the very moment he was being killed.

My first thought today is that when I look at the lives of great people throughout history, people who, like Stephen, stood up for what is right no matter what the cost, I want to be that sort of person. When you think of the people throughout history who have stood up for what is right, think how many of them have been cut down for doing so. In the last 100 years there has been Martin Luther King, who gave his life for standing up for justice for African Americans. There was Gandhi, who led his beloved India to liberation and used non-violence in the face of extreme persecution, and who Martin Luther King used as his inspiration. Though not a Christian, Gandhi once said that the Sermon on the Mount was the greatest lesson in life that has ever been given. Another time, when in London, he was asked by a journalist, "what do you think of western civilisation?" and Gandhi answered, "I think it would be a great idea". People like this who had the courage to speak into their culture regardless of the consequences are the sort of people who are my heroes.

Over the last 100 years we have also had Oscar Romero, who fearlessly stood up for the poor in El Salvador, and who was gunned down while saying mass one day in 1980. Even, depending on your political persuasion, Bobby Kennedy, who had a passion for justice and was running for the US presidency when he was assassinated in 1968. Many people believe that if he had lived, America and the world would be a different place today. In more recent times there has been Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, and Mother Teresa in India. Then there have been the countless others who have given their lives out of service to God and His kingdom but who are not public figures, and for whom there is no recognition. These are the unsung heroes.

Then of course we have Jesus himself, the Son of God who was rejected by his own people and was put to death on a cross, and who died for our sins, and forgave his killers, you and me, even while he was breathing his last breaths.

Stephen was a man like this. He is an inspiration to me, despite the fact that we don't know a lot of detail about his life. But really, I don't think I need to know a lot about his life. I know that he was a man of extraordinary courage and I know that he was the type of man that I want to be, a man who does not cower in the corner in the face of hardship, a man who does not take the easy road, a man who faces his trials head on and does not try to find the comfortable way out when he knows that what he is doing is right; a man who stands for truth, despite the fact that it will cost him his very life.

In this passage, Stephen is accused of speaking against the Temple and against the Law of Moses when in fact he is not speaking against those things at all. He is speaking against the fact that the Jews have misused the Temple and Law of Moses. Stephen is also a man who is misunderstood, and it costs him his life.

Ask yourself these questions. How much am I prepared to do that? How much am I prepared to stand up for what is right, to be misunderstood, even when it will cost me? Here in Australia, there is very little chance that it will cost us our lives, but what if it did? Would we have the courage of Stephen? Would we be prepared to face the hostility of those around us, maybe even our closest friends who don't understand, or members of our own family? Maybe you already have. Maybe you know what it is to experience the persecution of standing up for your faith and reaping the consequences of what that entails.

Beforehand, I mentioned Martin Luther King. One time in the 1960s when he had just come home from being jailed for standing up again for the rights of his people, his little 3 year old daughter innocently asked him, "Daddy, why do you have to go to jail all the time?". Would we be prepared to have our children ask us that?

Let's have a look at the similarities in Stephen's life compared to Jesus. Both spoke against the Jews for desecrating the temple. Jesus went through the temple and turned over the tables because the place where the Jews were using the temple as a market place was the only place in the temple that Gentiles could worship, and the Jews had taken that away from them. That's why Jesus got so angry, because the Jews weren't allowing Gentiles to come and worship God – they were using that part of the temple as a place to make money. Stephen too spoke against the Jews, as he was making the point that the temple was not the only place where God could dwell. God's presence was not exclusive to the temple; God's presence was in the hearts of those who want Him to be there.

To the charge that he was speaking against the Temple, Stephen proves from the Old Testament that God never restricted himself to a building or certain area of the world. He was always the God of the whole world, who was accessible to all who called on him in faith. God appeared to and worked with their greatest leaders outside of Israel, and before there ever was a Temple.

- God appeared to Abraham and made his promises to form the nation of Israel when Abraham was in Mesopotamia (vs 2).
- He worked through Joseph to build and preserve the nation of Israel when Joseph was in Egypt (vs 9).
- He appeared to Moses in the burning bush and promised to deliver Israel from Pharaoh in the wilderness of Midian (vs 29,30).
- When the Temple was constructed, he specifically rejected the idea that he was in any way restricted to it. READ VS 46-47. At the Temple dedication, Solomon specifically denied that the Temple in any way contained God (READ 2 CHRONICLES 6:18)
- God made his sentiments about this crystal clear through Isaiah (vs 48-50).

APPLICATION: The Jews had developed a royal EDIFICE COMPLEX! And the church has certainly not proved immune from this! What do most people think of when they hear the word "church"?

Is church a group of people who know God personally, or is church a building? Is this church, where we come here in Croydon on a Sunday morning? I remember someone at the previous church we went to often made the point that church is not somewhere we go but it's who we are.

APPLICATION: God is always available to people who want to know him, and he is always moving out to reach more people.

The Old Testament tells us that Israel is God's chosen nation—but that didn't mean that all Jews have an exclusive claim on his blessings. He chose them to be his light to the rest of the world. He chose them to be the vehicle through which he gave the Bible to the world. He chose them to be the nation from which he gave the Messiah to the world. How we respond to this is a key indicator of how well we know the true and living God.

Stephen was also charged for speaking against the Law of Moses. In his defense of this charge, Stephen demonstrates that the Jewish people had a rich legacy of rejecting God's deliverers and their message.

When God raised up Joseph, his brothers became jealous of him and rejected him (vs 9).

- When God raised up Moses to deliver them from bondage in Egypt, the Israelites rejected him (vs 25-27, 35) and the Law God gave through him (vs 39).
- This legacy of rejecting God's deliverer/spokesman continued right through Jewish history up to the men standing before Stephen (read vs 50-53). They knew the Old Testament by heart and scorned the rebellious Israelites—yet they were guilty of the same thing by rejecting Jesus and now the message that Stephen was bringing to them!!

Today we have looked at how the Jews had a rich legacy of rejecting God's deliverers and message. Yet when we examine the Bible, the question we must always ask is 'what does it say to us?'. What does it say to you? When we look at how the Jews rejected God's purposes over many years, we have no right to sit back and point the finger and say 'yeah, look how hypocritical they are'. When we read this, we have a responsibility to say 'well how have I rejected God's purposes?'; 'how am I rejecting God's purposes by my current lifestyle?'. The only way we are going to grow and become close to God and experience the joy of our salvation is by humbling ourselves before Him and coming to Him in repentance and accepting his forgiveness for us. This week we have been seeing on the news the stories of the need for debt relief for African nations, leading up to the G8 meeting of the leaders of the 8 richest nations in the world next week in Scotland. One of the campaigns that has been highlighting the plight of the poor in Africa and that has been putting pressure on these rich nations, including Australia, has been a campaign called the Micah Challenge. It is called the Micah Challenge because it takes the challenge of the prophet Micah in Micah 6:8 – what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. While the focus in these weeks, and particularly over the next week, is on the doing justice and being merciful, the last one often gets left behind – we're often not very good at walking humbly with our God. It is only when we fall in humble repentance on our knees before God that we will begin to change and have the courage of a man like Stephen to live out our faith no matter what the consequences, and no matter how it will make us feel.

by Nils von Kalm
3 July 2005