

~ACTS~

Lesson 24- The Martyrdom of Stephen

For the past few weeks, we have been studying Acts chapter 7 and working our way through Stephen's defense as he stands boldly before the Sanhedrin Council in the face of persecution. And today we will be looking at the final verses of this chapter from verses 51-60. And leading up to this section, Stephen has been showing the Council from their own Jewish history that the Jewish fathers have a habit of resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting God's chosen deliverers. And now after giving them this history lesson for the last 50 verses, Stephen tells them that they are no different, because they too have resisted the Holy Spirit because they have rejected the Messiah whom God sent from heaven as their Deliverer, Jesus Christ. Let's read our text today and then start looking at it verse by verse, **Acts 7:51-60**.

There are always two responses to the Gospel: Humble or harden; and clearly, the Sanhedrin Council has hardened their heart to the Truth and they kill Stephen. These unbelieving Jews were just like their fathers. They had hearts of stone; hard hearts, stiff necked and uncircumcised hearts as Stephen describes in verse 51...

51) You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.

Stephen first tells them they are "stiff-necked." *σκληροτράχηλος*- literally one who hardens his neck, obstinate or stubborn. Proverbs 29:1 uses the same word in the LXX and describes a stiff-necked person as one who hardens his neck to rebuke. He is a person who refuses and rejects correction and instruction.

Then Stephen tells the Sanhedrin Council that they are **uncircumcised in heart and ears**. To a Jew, circumcision was the core of their belief because it was given as a sign of the covenant to Abraham, Gen 17:10-11. But circumcision was only meant to be an outward expression of an inward covenant of the heart. God wants our heart, He always has, **Romans 2:28-29; Jeremiah 4:4**. These unbelieving Jews didn't know God. They were so bound up in their traditions and Legalism that they missed the Spirit of God... they always resist the Holy Spirit. They didn't understand that the whole purpose for everything God did and promised in the Old Covenant was pointing to Jesus Christ so that He might have an eternal family with those who love Him in Christ Jesus. God is a God of relationships, a God of Fellowship. A covenant God, but not a covenant of the works of the flesh, not something based on Legalism, but rather a covenant of the heart. It's a covenant of faith in Jesus, of full trust and reliance on Him. And Stephen says you're rejecting that because **You always resist the Holy Spirit...** This word resist is the word *ἀντιπίπτω*. It literally means "to fall against." This reminds me of the "stone of stumbling and the rock of offense" that Isaiah foretold. Peter quoted in his epistle, 1 Peter 2:7-8. Jesus Christ is the Chief Cornerstone, and to them that believe, He is our Savior, but to those who reject Him, He became a stone of stumbling a rock of offense. And not just for the Jews on this side of the cross, but even for all those before who rejected the Prophets who spoke about the coming of the Righteous One. The Jewish fathers continually fell against the Spirit, even to the point that they persecuted and killed those prophets who spoke of the coming Messiah.

52) Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,

This has been the pattern of the Jewish fathers. They always reject the ones sent from God. Throughout all of history, God has always had His people on the earth speaking His Words. This was the purpose of the Prophets... to speak the Word of God, **Hebrews 1:1**. And then the Father sent The Word, Jesus Christ, His Son, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1:14; **Hebrews 1:2-4**. God sent His Prophets of the Old Covenant to usher in the Messiah into this world, so that the Word, Jesus Christ, could bring in the New Covenant in His blood. Remember, the entire purpose of the Old Covenant was to foreshadow the greater Covenant in Jesus Christ unto Everlasting Life in Him. And Stephen says it was

their Jewish fathers who killed these Prophets **who foretold of the coming of the Righteous One**. Ezra closed out the Old Testament when he wrote 1-2 Chronicles and in these books he recounts the history of the Jews, and he ends with this same statement in **2 Chron 36:15-16**. Jesus gave us a parable describing this in **Luke 20:9-19**. And Jesus Himself said this in **Matt 23:37**. Lately, as I read through the Prophets, I am constantly seeing the correlation between the Prophets of the Old Covenant speaking the Word of God and us as New Testament believers, Ambassadors of Jesus Christ sent to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel, again speaking His Words and being persecuted on His behalf, **Matt 5:11-12**. Paul when comforting the Thessalonians said this same thing, **1 Thess 2:14-15**. This is why Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12- ***“all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”*** All who speak the Word of God will suffer persecution, but there is great reward for those who endure and are faithful to the end, Rev 2:10-11; 3:10-12; Romans 8:17-18; Col 3:1-4; 2 Tim 2:12; 4:7-8. And we will see in our text that Stephen is rewarded and honored for his faithfulness to speak the Truth even unto death.

Stephen is telling the Sanhedrin Council, just as your fathers persecuted and killed the prophets who foretold of the Righteous One to come, that is the Messiah, so too **you have become the betrayers and murderers** of Jesus Christ and you killed your Messiah. You're no different than your idolatrous fathers. And then Stephen gives them one final indictment in verse 53...

53) who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.

Stephen again convicts them of not keeping the Law. He says that just as your fathers rejected the living oracles given to Moses, Acts 7:38-39, you too have not kept the Law given to you. This is an audacious accusation to make against the Sanhedrin Council because according to them they were blameless in keeping the Law, **Philippians 3:6**. Paul tells us in Romans 3:1-2 that the Jews were the ones entrusted with these living oracles. But Stephen says **you have not kept it...** because if they had kept the Law, they would have accepted Jesus Christ, because Jesus came to fulfill the Law. The purpose of the Law was not to make man Righteous, but to expose our sin and show us the need of a Savior, Romans 3:20; 7:7. The Law bears witness of God's Righteous standards of which only Jesus Christ, the Righteous One alone can fulfill. This is why Jesus Christ came, **Hebrews 10:5-7**. He came to fulfill the Righteous requirements of the Law so that anyone who believes in Him can have Everlasting Life through Him, Matt 3:15; 5:17; Gal 2:16; Romans 3:20-23; Hebrews 7:18; 8:13; 10:9. Stephen says, but you Sanhedrin Council, you have rejected the Law because you rejected the Righteous One whom the Prophets foretold would come to fulfill the Law. You rejected the One whom the Law foreshadowed, and you betrayed and murdered Him. Stephen, through the power of the Holy Spirit gives them this hard, but loving indictment and now in verse 54-60 we see their response...

54) When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart...

This is the work of the Word, to pierce the heart and expose it. Hebrews 4:12- ***For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*** 2 Tim 3:16. This is the third time so far in the book of Acts that we have seen the Word of God cut people to the heart. And as I said earlier, people have a choice when they hear the Word, they will either humble or harden. The first time was on the Day of Pentecost after Peter preached Jesus and convicted them of killing their Messiah, **Acts 2:37-38**. This first time they humbled and repented. However, the second and third time had a different result. After the twelve Apostles were arrested and they stood before this same Sanhedrin Council and Peter preached Jesus again to them, **Acts 5:29-33**, and this second time they were furious and plotted to kill them. This word "furious" **διαπρίω**, is the same Greek word as "cut" in verse 54. It literally means to cut in two. They were cut in half to the heart, but when the Sanhedrin Council was cut to the heart both times, they became furious and murderous in their response. Look at the remainder of verse 54...

54) When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart... and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

Their response to being cut to the heart was a hatred and hard heartedness toward God, **they gnashed at him with their teeth**. This is the same phrasing that Jesus uses when those who are cast into the furnace of fire, He says there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth, Matt 13:42, 50. And when I read this in the past, I always pictured them being in so much distress from the flames that they are grinding and gnashing their teeth. But now as I was thinking about this phrase, this gnashing of teeth is really a stubborn hatred of God. That even though they have been cut to the heart, they still will not repent. And even when they are thrown into the lake of fire, they are so stubborn and hard hearted that they will for all eternity be blaspheming God. And we see an example of this in the book of Revelation. As God begins dealing out His wrath and judgement on the unbelieving world, they know these catastrophes are from God. They know it is His wrath, but they still will not repent, Rev 6:15-17; 9:20-21; 16:8-11, 21. Instead of humbling their heart and repenting, they blaspheme His Name and gnash their teeth at Him. And that is exactly what they begin doing to Stephen. But look at Stephen's response. Notice where his focus is... it's on Jesus Christ...

55-56) ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Remember where Stephen is. He's not outside yet. He is still inside the building and yet he looks up and sees into another dimension. His eyes are fixed on Jesus and Jesus opens His eyes and allows Him to see into heaven. And notice Stephen calls Jesus, **the Son of Man**. This was a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13. And these members of the Sanhedrin Council remembered Jesus calling Himself by this title. It's interesting to note that Stephen is the only person to call Jesus the Son of Man besides the two prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation. Stephen says this, led of the Spirit, to make the connection that he is seeing Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, the Messiah whom they crucified, and He is alive and standing at the right hand of the Father.

Why is Jesus standing? Notice Stephen says, **"I see Jesus standing at the right hand of God."** Now we all know that Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, but I thought He was seated next to the Father. He is, and scripture is very clear on this, Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 16:19; Lk 22:69; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2, but here Stephen sees Him standing. Why is Jesus standing here? This is the only reference to Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. I think Jesus is standing because He is standing in honor to receive the first Christian martyr into His Kingdom. He is standing to welcome him home saying, **"Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord."** Matt 25:23. The Council responds again with hatred in verses 57-58...

57-58) ⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸ and they cast him out of the city and stoned him...

Again, notice the reference to their ears. They **stopped their ears**. They don't want to hear the Truth. Just like 2 Tim 4:4- **"They turn their ears away from the Truth..."** They do not want to render themselves in submissive hearing to the Truth, Acts 7:39, but they are just like their fathers before them, they would rather kill anyone who speaks the Truth. So they drag Stephen outside the city and stone him, but notice Stephen's response to this persecution as he is being murdered...

59-60) ⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Notice Stephen's gaze is still fixed on Jesus, I believe heaven is still open to Stephen's eyes and he has been looking at Jesus this whole time, even as they dragged him outside. And he says two things as rocks are being thrown at him. He says, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** and **"Lord, do not charge them with this sin."** It is interesting to note the parallels between Luke's Gospel account of Jesus on the cross and Luke's account of Stephen's martyrdom.

Luke 23:46- <i>And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit.' "</i>	Acts 7:59- <i>"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."</i>
Luke 23:34- <i>Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."</i>	Acts 7:60- <i>Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin."</i>
Luke 23:46- <i>Having said this, He breathed His last.</i>	Acts 7:60- <i>And when he had said this, he fell asleep.</i>

These are amazing parallels between Stephen and Jesus. It is only a person who has their entire focus fixed on Jesus who can say these words while being murdered. There is a supernatural joy that can come upon a person even among the most intense persecution in which they can truly love their enemies and be faithful even unto death. Many times, you see examples of this in the Foxes Book of Martyrs. Amazing, faith building accounts of faithful men and women who suffered martyrdom for the Name of Jesus Christ.

I don't know if you noticed, in verse 58, but I purposely passed over a prominent man who was standing there consenting to Stephen's death. And that is a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus who later becomes the great Apostle Paul. It says in verse 58...

58) and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

This is the first time we are introduced to the Apostle Paul, but at this point in our story he is still known as Saul of Tarsus. He was a terrible persecutor of the Church in his early years, and it is through Stephen's death that he launches an all-out assault on Christianity and creates a dispersion throughout the world as Saul begins arresting and killing those who believe in Jesus. But what the enemy meant for evil, God turned it for good because this dispersion because of the persecution, actually becomes a catalyst to bring the Gospel to the ends of the world.

Stephen's death begins a rampant persecution against the Church as Saul leads the charge arresting Christians. We see this beginning in chapter 8 that we will look at next week, **Acts 8:1-4**. And Saul continues attacking the Church into chapter 9, **Acts 9:1-2**. And this persecution continued against the Church until Jesus Himself confronts him on the road to Damascus, **Acts 9:3-6; 15-16**. It's at this point that everything changes for Saul, and he is born again from Saul the persecutor to Paul the Apostle. And I think one of his best testimonies of this is recorded in **1 Timothy 1:15-16**. God's grace is powerful enough to save even the most wretched sinners. He saved Saul and he saved you and me out from our wretched lives of sin and darkness and translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son.

I believe that Saul was there in the Council to hear Stephen preach that day, and if so, just think about the seed that was planted from Stephen's sermon that began working on Saul's heart, preparing him for his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Stephen had an extremely short ministry, but the whole purpose of that day may have been for Saul to hear these Words from Stephen. And when Jesus told him, "It is hard to kick against the goads," this cut him to the heart, and he repented. This just shows that you never know what kind of seed you are planting when you are faithful to speak the Truth of God's Word. Even to somebody that you might think is totally lost, but the Word of God is powerful to change even the most wretched of lives.