

The First Martyr- Acts 7:54-8:3
Notes, Family Worship, Bible Reading

Notes from the Sermon

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." This quote attributed to second century Christian Tertullian is a gentle reminder that the faith once for all delivered to the saints also comes to us with great price. In the longer version of the quote, Tertullian wrote, "But do your worst, and rack your inventions for tortures for Christians-it is all to no purpose; you do but attract the world, and make it fall the more in love with our religion; the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more." In other words, the harder you squeeze followers of Jesus, the more the Gospel will spread and the beauty of their witness and faith will be on full display. This truth is central in our story from Acts this week, and has been true throughout the history of the church. All over the world and throughout time it has been suffering Christians, and even those dying for the cause of Christ that has lit fires of revival and awakening, as they have been unwilling to deny Jesus and cease their witness. These are believers who had their eyes on two realities. First, they saw the glory of God in the person of Jesus. His worth and beauty found only in the Gospel consumed their lives. They were not part time believers in Jesus using Him for their purposes. They realized He was their all consuming passion and their lives were dedicated fully to Him. Second, they knew the desperate needs of their neighbors and the nations even though the very people they were seeking to reach were antagonistic. They were hated for sharing the only message that could transform the hearts of people and the cultures in which they lived. Christ gave His followers two simple truths about enemies. First, those who were serious about following Jesus and living as witnesses would have enemies. Second, they were to love and pray for their enemies.

The story of Christianity is full of testimonials of people who were mistreated, beaten, and even murdered for Christ, yet, their response was to love and forgive those who did this to them while rejoicing and even singing as they died. This has always shocked bystanders and in so many cases led to the outbreak of faith, not the end of it. Our story from Acts this week is the first example. Stephen's witness for Christ led to his being stoned to death. Yet, Stephen sees Jesus standing to receive and affirm him and as a result he commits himself to Christ and forgives the people throwing rocks at him. His death started a persecution, led by none other than Saul of Tarsus (AKA the Apostle Paul - but he is not there yet) on believers in Jerusalem, so intense that most of this band of thousands flee the city and spread all over the world. It was a dark day for those in the story, but as we read we see God scattering the Gospel to the nations in preparation for the ministry of the very one who started the persecution. Yet, Stephen is dead, noble men bury him, and the church laments. The blood of the martyrs is the seed for the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the church. In the moment we may wonder, "Is this worth it?" But the Gospel gives us the remedy. First, Stephen was received into the very presence of Jesus. Second, his death lit a fire resulting in the Gospel being spread all over the world.

At this moment this type of threat does not confront us. The reality is that Satan has much more success defeating the church with prosperity and peace than he does with persecution and suffering. But we should not be complacent. Spirit filled people on witness for Christ will have enemies. In our context the heat of persecution and marginalization for our faith is warming quickly. Yet, our call is to see the glory of God and realize that these people are without hope unless they hear of Jesus and repent. We are to love them and pray for them, and we are to go, in boldness, filled with the Spirit, consumed with passion for Jesus. So I close with this declaration called *The Fellowship of the Unashamed*, found written on the desk of an African pastor who was killed for his witness.

I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of His. I

won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed. My present makes sense. My future is secure. I'm finished with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals. I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudity, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on His presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer and labor by power.

My pace is set. My gait is fast. My goal is heaven. My road is narrow. My way rough. My companions few. My guide is reliable and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the adversary, negotiate at the table of the enemy, pander at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, let up, until I've stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go till He comes, give 'til I drop, preach till all know, and work till He stops me. And when He comes for His own, He'll have no problem recognizing me. My banner will be clear!

Bible Reading for the Week

Daily Bible Readings

Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Jeremiah 22	Jeremiah 23	Jeremiah 24	Jeremiah 25	Jeremiah 26	Jeremiah 27	Jeremiah 28

Reading from this past week: Acts 7:54-8:3

Reading in preparation for this coming Sunday: Acts 8:4-25

Family Worship

Song - *King of Kings*

<https://youtu.be/BTqziQqlyzg>

Gospel Project

Unit: King Saul

Story: Israel Demanded a King

Big Picture Question: Why does sin separate us from God?

Answer: Because God is holy, sin has broken our relationship with God

Scripture: 1 Samuel 8-10

New City Catechism

Question #23: Why must the Redeemer be truly God?

Answer: That because of his divine nature his obedience and suffering would be perfect and effective.

Verse: Acts 2:24

Scripture

Acts 6:8-7:53

- Why did the rulers of the Jews get so angry? Why would people opposed the message of Jesus and the Gospel?
- As you read the story of how Stephen died, what about this event can give us hope for any hardship and suffering we might endure?
- How does God use the death of Stephen to advance the Kingdom and Gospel? How does He use our suffering and even persecution to show His glory and power?

Prayer

*Pray for our mission team in Charleston this week, and for God to use us in the lives of people in the city.

*Pray that in both life and death, you would live as a faithful witness (martyr) for Jesus.