

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 7:51.

I forgot to mention - on Sunday was my one-year anniversary of having a stroke. So we're okay, so far. (Clapping) I actually didn't remember until the second service. Somebody brought me bread. I got bread. And I said, "What is that for?" She said, "It's your anniversary." I said, "For what?" Anyway, a year has gone by. So I'm stuttering less. It's not bad.....any more than I used to, anyway.

So Acts 7:51 is where we're starting tonight. Let me give you the lesson in case you have to leave early. And I think there are two major lessons in these ten verses, the first one of which is it is faithfulness that God is interested in - far before observable fruit. In other words, God is more interested in your faithfulness to Him than in what you might produce, at least in a measurable sense. And secondly, that the influence of a godly life cannot always be measured immediately. And that's certainly the case with Stephen.

I don't know if you've ever felt opposed when you have shared the gospel with someone. Maybe you remember somebody pushing back as you begin to share about sin and the need to be saved. I don't know how you felt or how bad it got. Or did you feel you had the answers that you needed? Or did you back away? I ran into my buddy, Ray Comfort, down at the beach Saturday. He likes to train his little students down there at Huntington Beach, just standing on a little soap box (literally) and confronting folks with their sin, and he's real good at it. And he had a particularly really caustic guy in the audience. And I stood and watched him for a few minutes, and he handles it so well. But this guy was kind of brutal and yet, if you have the right answers, you don't back down.

Boldness in God's Word is related to a couple of things - the infilling of the Holy Spirit. You remember back in chapter 1:8 that the Lord said, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you to be My witnesses throughout the world, beginning here at Jerusalem." And then, in chapter 4:31, when they had prayed, the Lord shook again the place that they had been gathered, and it says the Lord filled them with boldness. So, one aspect of your boldness and mine - to share our faith (in every culture, in every situation) - is the working of God's Holy

Spirit. Along with that, there has to be (in your heart) a strong personal conviction that the gospel is true, that it has power, that what you share - whether it is received quickly or shared in opposition - has power to deliver, to save and to heal. Stephen was filled with the Spirit. He was assured where he stood, and that day that he stood before the Sanhedrin, he gave this message that we looked at last week that was pretty powerful and tremendously bold.

On Wednesday evenings, we've been going, I think, fairly slowly through the book of Acts to see how the Lord, by His Spirit, worked in the life of the early church. We have roughly thirty years of history in this book to see how the progression of God's Word went - beginning in Jerusalem and would end up so that Paul was able to write, thirty years from now, "It's gone out like this throughout all of the world" (Colossians 1:23). And so we've tried to go slowly because it's a model for what the church should be. This is what God would have us to be. And second of all, we've been asking the question - who does the Lord use? Because you have plenty of examples in the book of Acts of guys and women that God raised up. So you want to be those kinds of people. Right? The work is still the same - get the Word out to the lost in this generation.

So, we've come up to Stephen. We began in the book of Acts with the promise of Jesus before His ascension. He said, "If I go away, I'll send you the Holy Spirit, and He'll come upon you, and you'll be My witnesses, and I'll empower you to do so." We studied the birth of the early church on Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit fell upon those that were gathered. We looked at Peter's first message. Three thousand people got saved on day one. What a powerful message that must have been. Wouldn't you like to preach like that! We followed the work of the Spirit through the Temple, where the Lord healed a lame man by the Beautiful Gate, and, as a result, persecution arose for the first time. The church went from having favor with all men, early on, to now having opposition. And that covers chapters 3 and 4. We saw Peter and John arrested. They were threatened by religious rulers who didn't like the fact they were losing their grip on power and influence and control. They were brought before the Sanhedrin. The church prayed with them when they were released. There really was nothing they could do but threaten them, and it was not an easy time to be bold, but they were bold. In chapter 5, it's the enemy attacking from within, and there were a couple of folks - one couple in particular - who the Lord dealt with very severely. They were glory seekers - Ananias and Sapphira. She and he wanted attention in this ever-growing body, and we mentioned that week that I'm so thankful that the Lord usually has more patience

than that and deals with us with longsuffering. But great fear fell upon the early church. You can just imagine. And then more trouble followed as the saints continued to do what they were told not to do - continued to preach in Jesus' name, obeying the Lord. And so God, with His power, verified the Scriptures. This time it does look like all of the apostles were arrested. They were gathered together in front of this Sanhedrin group again. They were threatened, and then they were beaten before they were being let go. And so, even through it all, God continued to bless. The early church had added believers. In chapter 6, you begin to see the mathematics change from adding to multiplying, and you'll begin to read there, more often than not, multiplying. And, as the church multiplied, there was a need for the first organizational step in the church. They had widows that were Hellenistic. They weren't feeling like they were treated as well as the Jewish widows in town. They complained. The apostles decided, "We've got to teach and study and preach God's Word. Pick some guys out that are faithful, that you know, that have a good reputation for godliness. Let them be in charge of that." And they had the first organizational step towards putting some deacons in that place. (Deacons, in the Bible, take care of the physical well-being of the church). They picked seven Hellenist guys; we know that from their names. The qualifications are listed in chapter 6, and they're pretty high standards. And the apostles said, "We're going to commit ourselves to prayer and teaching." Well, out of the seven men that they chose, God sees fit to highlight two of them - Stephen (in chapters 6 and 7, that we will look at and finish with tonight) and then Philip (except for a couple of mentions of Saul in chapter 8, it really belongs to Philip and his ministry before we get to chapter 9 where Paul then comes forward and begins to walk with God).

Stephen began by delivering bread. He was a "food expert." He took care of folks. He organized well. As he did, the Lord gave him (because of his faithfulness in the little) more, and he began to share the gospel (chapter 6 tells us), especially in the synagogue where a lot of Hellenist people gathered - folks from outside the culture, they spoke different languages, had different practices. But he was sharing about Jesus. The leadership there (the Temple leaders) were frustrated with his wisdom. Rather than repenting, they were provoked. Rather than listening, they fought back. And yet they couldn't stand up to Stephen's wisdom that God gave him by the Scriptures and by the Spirit. And so they decided, "Well, what we'll do then is we'll get him arrested." They leveled accusations against him that were not true. They got the Sanhedrin to join together and have him brought before them. And, in chapter 7, we have his fifty-verse (roughly)

defense of his faith. It is the longest sermon in the book of Acts. If you were here with us last week, we went through it. It's a great example of how to preach or how to make your case with reason. Stephen knew his audience, he was relevant, he used the Scriptures a lot. Very smart to be able to put one verse together with another from a different part of the Scriptures. He went through the Israeli history with these men that were the leaders of the nation - showed them how they had a record of rebellion and unbelief, that when God was faithful, they were not. Though He had chosen them to be His people, they weren't the ones that had been faithful to Him. And every step along the way, Stephen answers the false accusations that were being made by false witnesses. They had accused him of four things - that he had blasphemed God, that he had blasphemed Moses, that he had blasphemed the law, that he had spoken against, or blasphemed, the Temple. And Stephen went out of his way to say, "Me?! Look, God sent Joseph to deliver you. You wanted him to die and sold him off to the Egyptians. He sent Moses to deliver you. You didn't want anything to do with him. Now He sends Jesus to save you, and you killed Him! You're saying I've been unfaithful?" And he went through all of those accusations, and he ultimately pointed everyone to Jesus.

Well, we stopped in verse 50. We read the last portion, but his sermon really stops in verse 50. Except there are a couple of verses left where he now directs the application to the people. Up to now, he's been giving a history lesson. But now he says "you." Rather than "us" or "they" or "back then," he now says "you." And rather than repenting, they turn into this uncontrollable, furious mob. So, Stephen says, "You've always been rebellious against the Lord," and I suspect you could hear sadness in his voice. I think the most difficult thing to deal with, as a pastor, is to see people that you care about walk away from the Lord, not do as well as you hoped that they might, and especially when they walk away from the hope that they have in Christ.

So, we're just going to look at the last portion from verse 51 through verse 60 tonight, where he talked to them about resisting the Holy Spirit and how they, then, decided to remove the irritation or the irritant rather than repent. Verse 51, Stephen says this, " 'You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.' " That's pretty bold. Right? To a bunch of men, seventy of them, who sat in judgment, who have tremendous power, the place that the apostles had been beaten, where John had been brought with Peter and been threatened, where Jesus had been put on trial. Same place. Same guys. And now here's Stephen, a man who has been walking with

the Lord for a while, and yet he is bold, he is filled with the Spirit (like we started to say), and he's convinced that the gospel he has to share is powerful. "You're no different than your forefathers. You're stiff-necked, you're stubborn, you're difficult, you're hard to get along with, you're obstinate like a wild ox, you're rigid. You're religious all right, but there's no life in you at all." When the LORD began to plague the people because of the calf that Aaron had made while Moses was up receiving the Law from God, you read in chapter 33 of Exodus that the LORD said to Moses, "I want you to go back to camp," and He talked to him about what was going on in the camp. And when Moses went, and he discovered what was going on, he went to speak to the LORD, and the LORD said, "I want you to go now towards the land that I have promised your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I want to bring you into the land of the Canaanites and the Amorites and the Hittites" (all those 'ites' that lived in the land). But then the LORD said, "And by the way, because of what you've done out here, I'm not going with you. If I go with you, I'm going to consume you. You are a stiff-necked people." And the LORD said to Moses, "Go tell the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people.' I would come down there in a moment and consume you, so you'd better just take off your ornaments and sit down and wait to see what I'm going to do with you." That's what the LORD said to the people, His people. "You're really hard to steer, to direct, to give direction to." Notice what Stephen says to them. He quotes out of Exodus 32 and 33. He then quotes out of Deuteronomy 10 as well. He says, "You always resist the Holy Spirit. You are of uncircumcised heart and an uncircumcised ear." That's pretty heavy-duty things to say to religious people whose lives depended upon ritual and formality. Now, true, they didn't have a heart for God, but they were the most religious people (outwardly) that you could find. They wouldn't listen to the Lord. They didn't listen to His direction. They thought killing Jesus was the thing to do. They thought beating the apostles was the thing to do. They buried the Scriptures from the people, kept them away from God. And Stephen does something that most of us, I think, would avoid doing. He calls them out on it publicly and boldly, not defiantly but yet confidently. And he says, "You're just repeating history. Nothing has ever changed. You're always resisting the Holy Spirit." Like I said last week, for fifty verses, he just plodded along, skipped whole books of the Bible, skipped hundreds of years to say, "It happened here, it happened there." He was really smart in the Bible. Without notes and without planning, without thinking about it or having to think it through, he was able to present exactly what they needed to hear. He was well-prepared. And he says, "You're always resisting the Holy Spirit. This is the recap of your history. God works, and you reject Him. You're a chip off the old block. It's the same sinful

response." You can read in the Bible where it says that you can "grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30). It's an interesting word, "grieve," because, at least by definition the word "grieve" is a word of love that means to be hurt by someone that loves you, that has a relationship with you. It's a violation of relationship. So it presumes that the griever is in relationship with God. It's His own that He's grieved by. He wants you to do better, and yet you don't. You can "quench" the Holy Spirit (we read that - 1 Thessalonians 5:19), which just means to put out the fire, unbelief and disobedience, and you can just kind of push God's work out of your life. He wants to work, but how can He because you're not willing to let Him work. And then, there's that word "resist," which is what is used here; which is used more often for unbelievers than believers. God speaks, and we, "No, I don't want to do what You say." And, at least in this case, there were generations of people that knew what God wanted and decided to refuse His direction. The problem for them was that everything Stephen is saying is absolutely true. I think people get the most mad when somebody tells them the truth. Right? "That's not true!" "Well, no, it's true." And it was certainly true what Stephen was saying. We have a whole book to go look it up if we're not sure.

Notice he says, in verse 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, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.' " The problem, like I said, was there was truth to it. If you go back and read Hebrews 11, where you can read about those who mocked the message of God and scoffed at the prophets, they didn't want to hear it. And yet God had sent them, constantly, the warnings and the direction, if you will, from His Word and through His people for generations - to this group of men and group of women. So, "Which of the prophets didn't you persecute? Which one of the prophets haven't you killed?" And think about it. Isaiah was cut in half. Jeremiah was stoned to death. Zechariah was martyred between the Temple and the altar. Just prior to the Babylonian captivity (in 2 Chronicles 36, right towards the end of that historic book), you read these words, "And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (verses 15-16). Now those are the words that the LORD sent to the nation right before He sent them into captivity in 606 B.C. So, for all those years, God said, "Your history is one of not listening at all and certainly not

responding." And that's nothing compared to what this group has done. This group had killed Jesus, had plotted and wanted to remove Him though He was prophesied, though He fulfilled every word that the prophets spoke about Him - where He was born, to a virgin. Go through the list. I mean, who couldn't have been convinced, you would say. But they weren't. Now, imagine if you're this young man, Stephen, who stands before others with ammunition. You're loaded with Scriptures, and you're throwing it at "Scripture people," and they just can't say anything. But all they can do is get angry, and the more he spoke, the angrier they got.

Do you remember that parable that Jesus told? It's found in Luke 20, about the parable of the wicked husbandman, and Jesus told it to this leadership group. He told it to the men and all that we find these guys now standing before. But it's in Luke 20, and it began with saying, "He began to tell the people this parable: 'A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went into a far country for a long time.' " Now, the vineyard is Israel. It's the people that God has chosen. It's through them that the Messiah would come. God's intention was to let the world know who He is through His people that He had picked. They weren't the most powerful, they weren't the smartest. They were chosen by God. And so this vineyard is Israel, who was given the responsibility to tend God's people or, if you will, the field, the world. You read in that parable, as it continued, that, " 'At vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the vinedressers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.' " And so it went. God came looking for fruit - sent the prophets, sent His servants. Nothing. And this continued year after year, time after time. And we read, in verse 12, " 'And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also and cast him out. Then the owner of the vineyard' " (the Lord Himself) " 'said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Probably they will respect him when they see him." ' " And so the Son was sent. Jesus came. And you read in the parable, " 'But when the vinedressers saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours." So they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do to them?' " (for that kind of behavior). Now when Matthew 21 records this parable, the answer from the people is what you read in verse 16 in Luke. They say, " 'Well, He'll come and destroy them. He's going to deal with them. He can't just let that go!" And Jesus, as He shares, if you will, repeats to them the answer that they give (there in Luke). And they said, " 'Oh, Lord, don't let that be so,' " and Jesus said, " 'Have you never

read in the Scriptures that "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?" Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.' " In other words, you're going to have to die one way or the other. Right? You're either going to get judged, or you're going to give up your life to serve Him. But then we read this. This is what Luke writes, verse 19, "And the chief priests and the scribes that very hour sought to lay hands on Him, but they feared the people - for they knew He had spoken this parable against them." They realized that Jesus was talking to them. He had hit home with them. Jesus spoke to the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23, and He said to them how often He wanted to gather them together, but they were like snakes. They were just a brood of vipers. They're serving themselves. And He mentions Zechariah's murder there in that discussion with them and how He wanted to gather them together, but they wouldn't come, and, "You've just been a murderous, stiff-necked people all of your life."

So Stephen gets up, and he really communicates, if you will, the heart of God to the people. Paul, when he wrote to the Thessalonians (his first letter), he said to them (towards the end of chapter 2), "For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets;.....forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved,.....but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost." Paul makes mention of how the religious opposition had been such that not only did they not hear it, but they wouldn't let others hear it as well. Well-documented in heaven.

Now notice what Stephen says to this very official group of seventy men with their long robes and their long faces. "Which of the prophets didn't your fathers persecute? And they've killed those that were foretelling us of the coming of the Just One." I love the name. The Just One. They killed the only One that was Just. Right? It's amazing how spiritually blind you can get when you profess to be spiritually alive. When I got saved in the early 70's, there was a performer named Larry Norman. You that have been around a while might remember him. Passed away a few years ago. But, in any event, he had a song, and one of the lines in the song said, "Our money says, 'In God We Trust' while it's against the law to pray in school.' " And I thought, "Well, that's right. That's about as blind as you can get religiously." Right? You put yourself in a position where you say, "I love God, and I want to walk with God," but you live your life in such a way that you're not just, He is. Well, they killed the only One that was ever Just. And notice what he says of them in verse 53, "You of all people who received the law by the direction of angels

and have not kept it." In other words, "God gave you divine direction. Do you remember Moses showing up in town with the first edition of the Law of God written by His hand, by the finger of God?" It's a quote out of Deuteronomy 33, where it says that "He came with ten thousands of His saints." That's the way it reads in our New King James. But if you read it in the Septuagint, it says, "He came to give them the law with a myriad of angels," and I'm sure that that is Stephen's reference because he used the Old Testament Greek because that's what he knew. So he would have quoted out of the Septuagint - a direct quote out of Deuteronomy 33:2. The point is, "You've been given so much, much is going to be required of you. You're stiff-necked, you're uncircumcised, you always resist the Spirit. You and your fathers have killed everyone that's come to talk to you about God's will. You've even killed those who've foretold the coming of the Just One, and then you killed Him! You, of all people, who have been given the law in a miraculous manner."

Well that's all he could get out because now he is interrupted. At this point, the crowd puts an end to Stephen's sermon, and we read this, verse 54, "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth." An out-of-control riot ensues. They don't make a vote. No sentence is given. No agreement is settled upon. The religious, out of their heart, quickly comes what is really in their heart. They become a lynch mob. Can you imagine? Rather than saying, "You know, Stephen's right about us." He offered the Scriptures with kindness and with love, and yet he wasn't afraid. And so they grab ahold of him, and they drag him out of the city limits, and they would stone him to death. You watch this, and you read this, and I don't know about how it makes you feel. It makes me mad. I want to say to the group, "You guys can just rot in your wickedness." You know? God does something far better. He has endless patience.

So, as they looked to remove the irritation, God seeks to give them one final insight into where they're at so that they might be saved. Notice from verse 54 that this solemn assembly of men turns into a mob that is now bent on killing yet another of God's servants. They killed Jesus, they threatened Peter and John, they beat the apostles, and now they got ahold of one of these deacons whose responsibility has been to feed widows. But here's the problem, verse 54, "they were cut to the heart." They were convicted big-time. They knew he was right. They were guilty as charged, but admitting it was out of the question. Look how crazy people get when they reject the truth. Zechariah, when he was sent again to the nation of Israel, explained why the captivity to the Babylonians had to come.

And in chapter 7:11-14 of Zechariah, this is what he says, " 'But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen,' says the LORD of hosts. 'But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.'" But the LORD pointed out to Israel, "Look, you didn't listen. You won't hear Me, you won't follow Me, you won't obey Me even though I've done all this stuff. So here's the deal. You don't listen to Me, now I'm not listening to you." That was His comment to them. But you notice that here? "They were cut to the heart."

Here's why they're so mad - it hit home. Right? Stephen gave them but two choices that they could have gone. They could have repented, or they have to turn on him. They have to remove him. What they didn't realize, and what most folks don't, is that when you get rid of a Stephen, that conviction doesn't go away. Well, Stephen goes away. The conviction stays. Just ask Paul, who was greatly convicted this day. It hadn't worked in killing the prophets of old, it hadn't worked in getting rid of Jesus. Saul would find out, I think, soon enough - when he would meet personally with Jesus on the main road into Damascus - you can't get just get of conviction. And I think that that's something you should know when you're sharing with people, especially when they get mad. And I always believe, and maybe I'm wrong (and I don't have a biblical....well, maybe I do a little, but I'd have to twist it so I guess we won't use it), I'm convinced that when people get mad, they're closer to the truth than you and I know. Because it's usually that violent behavior (like this) that tells you you're hitting a nerve. The people that just seem to, "Yeah, never mind, I don't care," you wonder if you're gettin' to them. But the people that get mad, I always feel good about it when they get mad or when they want to argue, when you're witnessing to folks. Or maybe that's just me. No. I think that that's probably true of all of us.

Notice what their response was. "They gnashed at him with their teeth." Isn't that kind of an interesting colloquial phrase? It is used in the Bible in several places to describe hell. The gnashing of teeth. Right? That's what we read in the Scriptures. "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham

and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out" (Luke 13:28). Or what Jesus said in Matthew 13:42, where He said, "He will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." It seems to me hell is going to be filled with a lot of angry people who are angry and now find out they were wrong. The natural question, I guess, that comes to our hearts when we're trying to learn from God's Word about how do we live and minister in our culture is that you want to say, "Why didn't they get it? Couldn't they see it?" I know we say that because we're spiritually enlightened. God has moved into your heart, so you get it, it makes sense. But it doesn't make sense to them, and sin will leave you completely blind. If you go back and read the response of man, in general, at the sixth judgment of the trumpet judgments in Revelation 9, you will read that there were judgments falling and people suffering and the plagues killing many. And then you read this line, right at the end of the chapter (9:21); but it says, "And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts." If you jump ahead to chapter 16 of Revelation, the fourth and fifth vial (bowl) judgments, you read that, as they poured out the fourth bowl judgment, the power of the sun began to burn men. Verse 9, "And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues." And then it says, "And they did not repent and give Him glory." Really? The sun is so close, you're burning up now, and you're goin', "Yeah, I'm not repentin'." How dumb can you possibly be?! It's because sin blinds you. On the fifth pouring out of that vial (bowl) judgment, there was darkness upon the earth. I mean, so dark that "they gnawed their tongues because of the pain" (verse 10), and it says (verse 11), "They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds." So, I heard a guy a couple of months ago pray for his uncle, who is an alcoholic, and say, "Lord, just make him miserable so he'll get saved." And I wanted to read him out of Revelation 16. Look, these people won't get saved, and they're gnawing on their tongues, and the sun is burning them, this perpetual sunburn, and people are dying! That's not the way it works. It just shows you how blind you can be. People heard from the Lord, and yet they didn't respond. Which is why Jeremiah wrote (17:9), "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" I think it's a good understanding when you go out to share with people that, look, life can get harder for them. That doesn't mean they're going to hear. Right? That doesn't work. What works is God opening their eyes and that they can see who He is. From the ministry of the prophets over so many generations, leading to the coming of Jesus, and now the words of Stephen, all that was remaining for these guys was judgment. And yet the Lord is still inviting people to get saved.

How were these guys satisfied? When Stephen was dead, then they were happy. A guy that hadn't hurt them, just loved them, talked to them about the Lord, gave them direction. And the writer of Hebrews makes mention of men like this who were martyred for their faith, and he describes them as "those of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38). But yet God saw to it that they got a witness. Stephen certainly qualifies for that title. But notice the hardening of the heart. They just don't see it. "They were cut to their heart, they gnashed at him with their teeth." Full of fury.

But I like verse 55. Notice the words, "But he." They went nuts. "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." Old Stephen's at peace, he's faithful, he's seeing the things that are invisible. He would die the way that he lived. He had it all together. He kept his eyes on the grace of God that he needed for the situation. He was an amazing guy. "On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified." That's what Peter would write (1 Peter 4:14). So imagine the difference between this religious group with great power and then this man of God - a horde of angry, convicted souls and one man of God. And what Stephen does is he doesn't look at the people, he keeps his eyes on the Lord, and he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Now, it says (here in verse 55), he "saw the glory of God." Go and find out how many people in the Bible it says they got to see the glory of God. There aren't too many, that they get to see God in His fullness of who He is. Moses did (Exodus 33). Isaiah did (in chapter 6) "in the year that King Uzziah died." Paul (in 2 Corinthians 12) got to see the glory of God. John (in Revelation) saw it as well. So there's this big trial, but it's accompanied by even greater grace. And God got to show Stephen something which no one had seen, not in a long time. But notice what he sees. He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. If you go to Hebrews 1:3, it says that when Jesus finished His work of salvation, "He sat down at the right hand of the Father." It's the hand of power or of authority. And yet it does seem like Jesus now stands up to greet the first martyr to the church, home, and He wants to be sure that Stephen's eyes are upon Him. But he becomes, like I said, the first martyr in the church. "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21 & 23).

So, Stephen is just blown away by what he sees. Right? By the way, it had been in this very hall that the Lord was put under oath (Mark 14), and they questioned Him about who He was, and they said to Him, "Do You hear what everybody's testifying of You and yet You keep silent?" And the high priest said to Jesus, "Are You the

Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am. I am, indeed. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! He's worthy to die!" Same place. And now Stephen stands in the same hall in front of the same people and goes, "Hey, there's Jesus! I see Him." Well, you can just imagine what that did.

Verse 57 says, "Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord." The crowd goes even berserk, stopping their ears, won't listen to the Spirit, won't listen to what He's saying. And Stephen had hit the nail on the head. Jesus was God, indeed. He'd risen, and now He sat at the right hand of the Father.

Verse 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. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' 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." The Sanhedrin religiously tried, I think, to apply Old Testament rules. From the Law, the punishment of blasphemy was stoning (Leviticus 24). Not only that, it had to be carried out outside of the city walls. So they're very formal in their murder for hire. The witnesses had to throw the stones first, and so these witnesses laid down their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, who was going to be Stephen's heir, if you will, to the leadership in the church (though nobody knew it yet). And they carried out their sentence with Saul standing by, approving of their behavior, of the sentence, of their response. He was all for it. It was high-fives all around from Saul. Stephen was oblivious to much of it, I suspect. He was looking up. He said, "Lord, I'm coming home." Jesus was within eyesight, now, of this young warrior of the faith. He was going to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). One thing left to do - he forgave them. He bends down on his knees, cries out for the Lord to receive his spirit but then asks the Lord to forgive them. Sounds much like Jesus, doesn't it? "Lord, don't lay this sin to their charge." What love Stephen had. How far does our understanding of God's forgiveness extend to others? It's a tough verse. But God loves us that way, and we should love others. And I love the description in verse 60, "He fell asleep," because the description of the death of saints in the Bible is not that you die but that you fall asleep. It doesn't mean that you have soul sleep or any of those silly ideas, but it does mean that you enter into your rest. So the enemies of God are grinding their

teeth, and they're going to spend their lives for eternity doing that while Stephen just goes to sleep and wakes up in the arms of the Lord.

Chapter 8:1 says this, "Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him." I don't think any of us are allowed to see all of the fruit that your life will produce nor what our death might accomplish. We were talking about that the other day with our staff. There are far more people that get saved at funerals than at weddings, and I guess that would make sense. Weddings, you don't think about how long you've got, but at funerals everybody has to stare at a grave, and nobody likes to be there. So, a Christian death can often do what - and I share that at funerals a lot - so and so going to be with the Lord has done something that hasn't been done for years, and I'll say to the people, "It got you to church." Because oftentimes the people that come to a funeral have never seen - they come in hoping the thing doesn't fall down, they haven't been there for so long. And so they're kind of a captive audience. And we have a lot of funerals here, sometimes three a week - families and folks that don't know us at all. But hundreds upon hundreds of new believer packets go out every year from funerals. We have several families that are here in the last six months because someone in their family died, and the whole family gets saved. It's an amazing thing. Now, the person who died doesn't get to see that, but we do. And I say that just to say this - you shouldn't despair about not seeing all of the fruit of your life because it is more difficult to plant than to reap. Does that make sense? Reaping's easy. You go out and, "Apples. Let's go get apples." Well, if they're there, you get a basket full of apples. But to put a tree out that's going to have apples eight years from now, and you're going to water it and watch it and prune it, and waiting, "Yeah, there are apples." It takes a lot more faith. "I hope it comes. They're supposed to have apples." An apple tree full of apples, easy. Faithfulness is harder. And certainly you can't despair when you don't see fruit right away. I remember sharing with my dad for twelve years after I got saved. And my dad was furious when I got saved. He busted his backside to send us to Catholic school. It was expensive for him. He emigrated from Holland. His job was far less than it was at home. He worked a lot. And then when I got saved, he thought I had just kind of thrown away everything that he'd done. "You wasted my money. How dare you!" And for three and a half years, we didn't see my dad at all at our house. He wouldn't come for birthdays. He didn't call for the kids. Christmas just came and went. He didn't care. So angry. Twelve

years later, he got saved. You really don't know how the Lord is working until you just stick with it. Effectively serving the Lord is not based on the length of service but on the wholeheartedness of it. I think you just wait.

And I mention that in Stephen's life because if it isn't for Stephen, Paul doesn't get off the ground, I think. Right? It is the light of Stephen's life - the way that he spoke, the things that he said, the way that he died - that bothered Paul. Because it's only going to be one more chapter that the Lord's going to say to Paul, "It's been hard for you, hasn't it, to kick against the goads or the pricks of your conscience" (Acts 9:5). "It's been a tough several months. You've been miserable, haven't you, buddy." And it was Stephen's fault. Stephen never found out. Stephen was gone by then.

Methuselah, who was the son of Enoch, was born to his father, Enoch, when Enoch was 65 years old. Methuselah would live to be 969 years old. In other words, he lived longer than anyone on the planet, anyone in recorded history. No one lived longer than Methuselah. There's only one thing mentioned. Now you would think you'd have a whole book called Methuselah because he lived almost a thousand years. For cryin' out loud, what was he doin'? (Laughing) One sentence about his life. And here's what it is - on the day that he was born, his dad (Enoch) began to walk with God (Genesis 5:22). Don't know if it was a hard delivery, about lost his son; whatever the circumstances were, whatever happened on the day that he was born (this guy would live almost a thousand years), his dad turned to the LORD, began to walk with God. For three hundred years, he walked with God, and then he becomes the Old Testament example of the rapture. One day, walking with God, 365 years old, the LORD took him, and he disappeared, and he was gathered to the LORD. It's a great picture of what the LORD's going to do with the church. And Methuselah just hangs around - dies in the year of the flood, 969 years. "When he dies, it shall come." I think that's what his name means. One accomplishment. What? His dad began to walk with God.

When we read of Mordecai's words to Queen Esther (and she's in a predicament where she has to go speak to her husband, the king, and she realizes that if she goes there and talks to him, he might kill her - it wasn't that kind of a good marriage thing, it was a powerful position), he said (Esther 4:13-14), "If you just stay silent at this time, don't think that you're going to get relief or deliverance for you or for the Jews or for anyone else. You're going to get caught up, and you

and your father's house are going to perish. You don't know. Maybe you've come to the kingdom for such a time as this. This is your moment."

Well, this is Stephen's moment. Right? This is the place that he came to stand. And God uses Stephen to prepare the heart of Saul and also to send the church forth into the world. I think it was St. Augustine (I'll quote a Catholic guy for my dad's sake) who wrote that the church owes the ministry of Paul to the sacrificial life of Stephen. And I think that's right. Now he never got to see that. And I don't know but if someone doesn't owe their spiritual well-being to your walk, to your faithfulness at work, to someone silently watching you go by. And you don't always get to hear that. But faithfulness is more important to the Lord than fruitfulness. Fruitfulness comes from faithfulness whether you get to see it or not. And I think it's good to remember that God sees the end from the beginning. Don't underestimate the value of your labor in the Lord. It is never in vain. Ever. I know it feels like that sometimes. "I've been prayin', I've been sharin'. Nobody's listening. I've invited 'em to church. They won't show up. They say they're coming. They don't. I don't know what I'm doin' here." You just be faithful, and let the Lord use you. He knows exactly what He's doing. As Stephen, if you're filled with the Spirit and with faith, then God will use you, and he'll use you to tell His story to others. He used Stephen. You don't all die. Sometimes you just live through it. Right? But don't think for a minute you don't have influence. I'm amazed, and I guess I get to see it because we're on the radio. We get letters from people all over the country that say, "Hey, I was listening to the radio show, and I got saved. And I just owe the church such a debt of gratitude." We get these nice letters. Oh, we get bad ones too, but (Laughing) the ones that you hear where people just hear God's Word from a Wednesday night service or a Sunday morning service, and they get saved. I was out in New Jersey a couple years ago, and a lady came up, and we had a baptism after the week of outreach, and she said, "Would you baptize me?" I said, "Sure." She said, "I got saved listening to you four months ago in my dentist's parking lot." (Laughing) And I said, "You're just tryin' to blame me for keepin' you from getting' your teeth worked on." And ha ha ha. "No, I wanted to listen to the end of the study." And then her husband got saved, and then her daughter got saved, and they were all three there to get baptized at once. Never met her. Never seen her since. God has a way of just causing your words and your life to make a difference. So just live it out. Be faithful. Because, really, not until you get to heaven when, at the gates, they'll be gathered, awaiting you and welcoming you, the fruit of your life, will you get to see what really has taken place.

But I'll tell you what. You can mess it up, too. Can't you? Not living as you should, not walking with God. So, may Stephen be an encouragement to you.

Next week, we're going to go with Philip to Samaria. We're going to move out of Jerusalem. For the first time, the church is going to move. And I want you to notice they didn't move on their own. They were all really comfortable. The Lord had said (in chapter 1), "Begin here to go to the whole world." Nobody has gone anywhere. Because we like easy, don't we? "We don't want to go to Samaria. Those people are weirdos. We don't want to go. We hate them, they hate us. That's the way we like it. We'll just stay here in Jerusalem." But when the pressure came, everyone was forced to move. And by that forcing to move, Stephen runs into Saul. Philip goes to Samaria, where Peter and John will be asked to come and help minister. And through that, Paul will be raised up to eventually go to the Gentiles, and the ministry of the church will become a worldwide ministry - all in about thirty years. So, looking forward to next week. Read ahead, and we'll probably spend two weeks - one in Samaria, where Philip has a really well-known name, and then the next week in the Sinai, where nobody knows who he is but where he is going to serve the Lord and reach an Ethiopian to take home the gospel there.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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