

(Acts) the Witness of Stephen

by Brian Brodersen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing that every believer is a minister and that God can use anyone, regardless of their background or education, to accomplish His work.

Duration: 1:02:50

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 6:8, Acts 7:2-3, Acts 7:9-10, Acts 7:12, Acts 7:54-58

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Evangelism"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of continuing the mission of spreading the gospel to the world. He encourages the audience to seek God's direction and be willing to be used by Him. The speaker uses the example of Stephen, an ordinary man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, who performed miracles and served in the church. The sermon also highlights the significance of understanding and sharing the word of God, as it has the power to transform lives and communities.

Transcript

Acts chapter 6, verse 8 is where we're going to pick up. And Lord, we pray that as we do that, that you'd speak to us. Lord, we long to hear your voice.

We long to hear you, Lord, speaking to our hearts. And so Lord, do that tonight and give us instruction. Give us understanding, Lord.

We know that the things that you had written, you had them written so we could learn from them. And so may we learn the lessons that you have for us here in these chapters tonight. And this we pray in the name of Jesus and for his glory.

Amen. So as we come to our text tonight, give you just a quick reminder of the background. The church had been going through some growth and there was opposition, but the opposition was being overcome through the faith of the apostles and the fellowship was growing and new people were being added.

And there was a bit of difficulty that had arisen between the two different cultural groups within the church. The Jews who were culturally Hellenistic or had embraced more of a Greek lifestyle and the Jews who had maintained a strong Hebrew lifestyle. There appeared to be some discrimination when it came to distributing to the poor people and the widows in particular.

It appeared that the Hellenistic or the Greek culture Jews were being discriminated against. And so this caused concern and they went to the apostles and they told them that something needed to be done. And you remember the wise counsel of the apostles was for them to choose out seven men from among them that could be placed over this.

And so that's indeed what they did. And as we pointed out in the last study, that seems to be where the deacon ministry developed in the early church, the deacons being the servants or those who tend primarily to the practical aspects of the ministry. And the apostles made it clear that that wasn't really their job.

They couldn't leave the word of God in prayer and take care of those things. That was a job that was meant for somebody else. And so they chose these seven men and out of the seven, two of them are now going to be more or less chronicled in their experiences.

And the first is a man named Stephen, and then the second will be a man named Philip. And what we're going to see, as I pointed out in the past, that although they were deacons and they functioned in a practical sense in the church, they helped out with the distribution of the food. And, you know, they did just those those practical things that needed to be done that sometimes people would think, well, you know, that's not really necessarily spiritual, but it was spiritual and it required spiritual qualifications.

They had to be full of the Holy Spirit. But what we're going to see is that they were also men of the word and they were men of power and they were men that were used by God. And as I look at them, I think of them in our modern context as, you know, those who are not in what you call the full time ministry around the church, but those who are part of the fellowship and those who serve the Lord here within the body.

And they might do those kinds of practical things like the guys that help you, you know, find your way around here if you're needing some guidance as you come onto the grounds or those that are helping out in the parking lot, perhaps, you know, helping people make sure they get safely back and forth to their cars or those who are involved in some of the things that are helping out with the poor and those kinds of things. The point is this, that those people who do that are serving the Lord just as well as those who are doing things like what I'm doing here tonight. And we need to make that clear, because sometimes I think we get this mentality in our minds that, you know, the pastors or the evangelist or, you know, they're the ones who are God's servants and the rest of us were, you know, we're just people who come and sit and listen.

But that is not to be the case. We're all the body of Christ. We all have different giftings and all of the gifts are important.

And it was a sad, sad day in the history of the church when there became a division that. Separated the clergy and the laity. That's a division that never should have come, it's a division that the New Testament does not even acknowledge whatsoever.

But so often in the church, that's been the situation, there's the clergy, they're the spiritual people who do all of the spiritual things like teach the Bible and pray and lead people to Christ and all of that. Then there's the laity. The laity are the ones who come to church and sit and listen and give the money and, you know, go about their business afterward.

And that's kind of been the, you know, the distinction that's been made. But it's so unbiblical. Sometimes people will say, well, you know, I'm just a layman, so I don't really have much of a contribution to make.

Understand this, that kind of distinction is not a biblical distinction. And as a matter of fact, Jesus, he doesn't like that kind of distinction being made whatsoever. In the book of Revelation, as Jesus is writing to the churches in the early chapters, there are chapters two and three.

Perhaps you remember he he addresses a problem that developed in one of the churches or actually a couple of them. He refers to it twice. It was the problem of the Nicolaitans.

And Jesus talked about the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and the deeds of the Nicolaitans. And he said emphatically, he said, I hate that. The question is, what is the doctrine of the Nicolaitans? What were the deeds of the Nicolaitans? And I think the answer to that is found in the word itself, because it's made up of two Greek words that mean to rule over the laity.

Nico means to rule over or to overcome or to overpower, and laity obviously means the laity or the common people. And this whole thing that began to develop early on in the church of a of a religious hierarchy of people who were deemed more important or more spiritual or more close to God or more in favor with God than others. That is something Jesus said, I hate that.

You see, because the new covenant was established to do away with any distinction like that. And one of the chief features of the new covenant, according to Jeremiah and then quoted in the eighth chapter of Hebrews, would be that all of them will know me from the least to the greatest. And in that day, no one would say to his neighbor, know the Lord, because everyone would have the same opportunity to know the Lord.

And so we all have the same opportunity to know the Lord. We all have the same opportunity to serve the Lord. But we have different callings.

We have different giftings. And it's important that we function in the calling and the gifting. But one calling isn't better than the other.

You see, the highest calling that you could possibly attain to is the call that God has upon your life. Some people would look at the call to the pastor and say that's the highest calling of God. It is for those who are called to it.

But for those who are not called to it, the highest calling is whatever it is they're called to. Some say the mission field is the highest calling. The mission field is the highest calling for those who are called to be missionaries.

But if you're not called to be a missionary, then whatever you are called to is the highest calling. And so with these men that we're going to look at and this is we could emphasize a bunch of different things, probably looking at this. But the thing that I want to impress on you and I want you to carry away from these studies, as we look at both Stephen and Philip, is that they were ordinary people serving the Lord in the church and ministering as Christians in the community.

You see, this is something that we need to remember that the ministry out in the community is a vitally important ministry as well. It's radically important because those are the people that we need to impact for the Lord. I know that sometimes we all feel like we'd like to just ditch the whole secular thing and congregate together at the church.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could all just be employed here and we could all hang around together every day and all that? Because you're out there in the world and it's hell out there sometimes, isn't it? It's tough. And you think, oh, I hate it out here. I don't want to be out here.

But that's the place that the sinners are. That's where those people that need the Lord are. And that's why we have to understand that ministry is out there.

And we need to be thinking in those terms. And we need to realize that wherever we are, whatever we're doing, if we're teaching school or working in a factory or if we're an auto mechanic or if we're a waitress or if we're running a business or whatever we're doing. We're serving the Lord, we're the Lord's servants, and we can anticipate the power of the spirit working in our lives, we we ought to hold ourselves to the high standard of knowing the word of God and being able to share it with people and all those things.

You see, because when you leave these grounds, you enter the mission field. You don't have to go across the border to do that. You just go out the parking lot and that's the mission field right out there.

And that's what we see in these guys. They were. Men in the church who served on a practical level, but also had functions outside the church and business and all of those kinds of things, and that's where the Lord was using them and he was using them powerfully out there.

So let's look together at verse eight. And Stephen. Full of faith and power did great wonders and miracles among the people.

So here's here's a guy full of. Faith and he's full of power and he's doing great miracles among the people. Some would say, well, wait a second, Stephen, who who said you could do miracles? You're not an apostle.

Didn't matter. He was a Christian. He was a servant of the Lord.

And you see, that's what I'm saying. Sometimes people would say to you, well, what gives you the right to speak for Jesus or why do you think you should be able to understand what the Bible says? You're not a pastor. You're not ordained.

You haven't been to seminary. Who cares? That's not the criteria. That's not the standard.

It's the Lord's work. It's the Lord's hand on the life of his people. And so here's this man, Stephen, and he's not just a person who distributes food to the poor widows.

He is a man who is full of faith and power, and he did great wonders and signs among the people. You know, one of the things I think is very unfortunate about the history of the church. The written history of the church is that it's it's very limited in its scope.

For the most part, it's limited to sort of a European context almost. And, you know, if you went into the bookstore, maybe even tonight and you were looking for some literature on church history or people in the church, you might see a book that maybe the title was something like Heroes of the Faith. And you pick up that book and you look through it and you'd find there's maybe, you know, 25 or 30 different people that are heroes of the faith.

And if you really, you know, did a lot of research and compiled all of the kinds of things like that that have been written, you might be able to come up with two or 300 heroes of the faith. But, you know, I look at

that, I think there are millions of heroes of the faith that nobody ever heard of. And there's things that have gone on in different regions and countries that nobody ever knew anything about, but yet, like Stephen, they were powerful things, they were dynamic things.

And so, you know, we have to be careful not to limit God to just certain sorts of, you know, environments that that he could work in or, you know, regions even or, you know, one of the things that would happen when the European missionaries would go into the other countries and establish churches. Some of them did a really good job and it was a really positive thing, but some of them, they would go in and they would never allow the indigenous people to rise to the place of full leadership of the ministry. They would always keep them under.

They always somehow felt that they could not really do it like the Europeans could do it. And that was a sad part of the missionary endeavor back in the 17 and the 1800s, those missionaries that failed to really pass the baton on and raise up the indigenous people and allow them to lead, having this idea that somehow, unless they had come from a Christian country, a European country, they probably could never really fully grasp, you know, what Christianity and the church and all that was to be about. That should never be our thinking.

We need to understand that God, it's a level playing field. God is no respecter of persons. God sees us all the same and God can use us all significantly.

It's up to him. And so here's Stephen, full of faith, power, miracles are happening. Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, which means the freed men and the Cyreneans and the Alexandrians and of them of Cilicia and of Asia.

And they were disputing with Stephen and they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. Now, just why it was that this particular group of people were disputing with Stephen, we don't really know what they're why they were the ones that were the most hostile. They were from a Hellenistic background, as it appears.

And but yet, for whatever reason, they they came on the attack against Stephen. They challenged him, obviously, because of some of the things that he would have been saying in his preaching. But they weren't able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke.

So they couldn't beat him in arguing with him regarding the things of the faith. And so what they did is they suborned men or they they solicited men. They they got some men to come along and slander Stephen.

If they couldn't beat him in a debate, then they took the age old tactic of trying to slander him. You know, that's how it is so often. You see that in debates today, sometimes the creationist will go out into different places and they'll debate the evolutionist.

And you always know the moment the evolutionist realizes that he's lost the battle because he stops arguing and starts calling names. Starts, you know, making fun of the person, you know, talking about their hairpiece or something and trying to take away the focus from the fact that they don't really have an argument. And that's what they did with Stephen.

They couldn't beat him. His his logic was too sound. He was communicating powerfully the truth.

They couldn't withstand that. And so what they then began to do was conspire against him and lie against him. And so these men came along and they said, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes. And they came upon him and they caught him and they brought him to the council and they set up false witnesses, which said this man ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place. And the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us.

So they arrested Stephen and they brought him before the council and they they lied. They said, we have heard we've heard him say this, that Jesus is going to come and destroy the temple and change the customs and all. Now, this was probably a twisting of some of what Stephen might have been saying, because Jesus certainly told the people that the temple was going to be destroyed.

That was something that he made clear. And he, of course, did talk about changing of the customs to some extent because he had come to fulfill the law of Moses. And so many of the customs and things that they were involved in doing were no longer going to be relevant.

But they would obviously have taken Stephen's words out of context and twisted them to their own end. And so there he is. He's before the council and all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him.

They saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. So here is Stephen begins his defense before them. The presence of the Lord comes upon him.

That's what it means when it says they saw his face as the face of an angel like Moses back in the days of old. You remember how having spent that time in the presence of the Lord those 40 days and 40 nights when he came down from the mountain, there was this glow about him. His face was shining.

His face was shining so much so that the people couldn't look at it. The the glare was was too much for them. Moses had to cover his face when he spoke to the people.

And now that same glory, it's the glory of God that's coming upon Stephen as he's about to now give his testimony to the council there. And so the high priest, he said to Stephen, he said, are these things so? Now, remember, this is the same group of people that tried and condemned Jesus Christ. This is the same group of people that recently had been dealing with the apostles, the other apostles.

They had arrested them on two separate occasions. They had beaten them on one occasion. They told them not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus.

It's the same group. And so now the high priest, he hears these words and they're all full of indignation. And he says to Stephen, is this so is this right? Is this what you're saying? And Stephen then proceeds to answer.

But as you go through it and we're not going to read through the whole seventh chapter, I'm going to let you do that on your own. But we're going to just highlight it as you read through it. It doesn't appear to me that Stephen really directly answers his question.

And I think the reason that he doesn't answer it is because it was a question based on false charges. There was nothing to the accusation itself. So Stephen, rather than waste his time trying to defend himself

and trying to say, no, no, listen, this is what I really said.

And he knew these people. These are the people that crucified the Lord. These are the people that have been threatening the others.

He knows that these people are resistant to his message. So rather than try to defend himself, what he's really going to do is he's going to build a case against them. And he's going to show them as he goes through the history of Israel, a brief history, an overview.

He's going to show them that they are doing exactly what their forefathers had done in the past. Now, you see, these were people who remember they prided themselves in their forefathers. They prided themselves in Moses.

They they tried to pit Moses and Jesus against one another. You remember on one occasion when they were trying that blind man and they were asking all kinds of questions and the blind man said he said, why are you asking me all these questions? Do you want to be his disciple? I said, oh, we we are the disciples of Moses. You're this man's disciple.

We don't know who this man is. We Moses, we know who he is. God spoke to him.

We don't know anything about this man. And they would always try to pit Moses against Jesus, and they claim to be the disciples of Moses. But Stephen, as he goes through, he's going to show that, yes, you are just like your fathers.

The ones who rejected Moses and the others that God sent to them, and so he begins his indictment really by taking them back to the father of the nation. He said, men, brethren and fathers, hearken, the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was still in Mesopotamia before he went to Iran. And he said to him, get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and come into the land which I will show thee.

And so then he goes on to talk about how Abraham obeyed the Lord and went to the land that God had appointed to him. And then he briefly passes over Isaac and Jacob, and he comes in verse nine to the patriarchs. Verse 12, he mentions them, the patriarchs.

These are the fathers of the nation. This is Judah and Levi and Issachar and Zebulon and all of the other Dan and all of the fathers of the nation, the one the ones who made up the 12 tribes of Israel. And he says concerning the patriarchs, now the patriarchs, your fathers, the one that that the ones that you're always boasting about.

We're connected to the fathers, he says, your fathers were envious and in their envy, they sold their brother Joseph into Egypt, but God was with him and delivered him out of his affliction. You see, what he's pointing out is that your fathers. Were wicked, just like you are.

They were so wicked that they sold their brother Joseph. Now, Joseph was a type of Jesus Christ, and he points out to them in verse 13 that it was at the second time Joseph made himself known to his brethren. You remember, Joseph was sold into slavery and then he eventually became the prime minister of Egypt.

And because there was a famine in the land, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt and there was Joseph. They didn't recognize him, the one that they had betrayed and sold into slavery. There he was.

They didn't recognize him, but he recognized them. And he decided that he was going to test them and see if they had ever really changed. And so he began this process of challenging them and putting them through all kinds of difficulty.

But finally. After they had gone back to their father, Jacob, and then come back to Egypt again, finally, he made himself known to them and the second time they recognized him. And the point that Stephen is making is that the one God was raising up to save you, he's the one that you rejected.

But the second time. You embraced him. So he's he's building an argument, showing a pattern throughout their history.

So from Joseph, he moves on and he comes next to Moses. And so verse 23 says, And when Moses was a full 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel, and seeing one of them suffering wrong, he defended him and avenged him that was oppressed. And he smote the Egyptian for he, Moses, supposed his brethren would have understood how that God, by his hand, would deliver them.

But they understood not. And the next day he showed himself unto them as they strove, and he would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, your brethren, why do you wrong one another? But he that did his neighbor wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? Now, look down in verse thirty five, this Moses, whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? The same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel, which appeared to him in the bush. And then in verse thirty nine, again, regarding Moses, to whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them and in their hearts, they turned back to Egypt.

So, again, you see, he's he's building the case. And basically what he's saying is that our people have always rejected. God's way, they rejected Joseph, they rejected Moses, and he brings it right down to the current situation.

Verse 51, he stiff necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. You do always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did, so do you, which of the prophets have not your father's persecuted and they have slain them, which showed before the coming of the just one of whom you have now been the betrayers and the murderers. So you see, Stephen had no intention of trying to justify himself here.

His goal was to show them their culpability, once again, bringing back before them the responsibility for the rejection and the execution of the Messiah. You remember, that was the thing they were paranoid about. They said to the apostles earlier, they said, you keep trying to bring this man's blood on us.

But you remember what they said when Pilate was determined to let Jesus go, they said his blood be upon us and our children crucify him. And then you're trying to hold us responsible for this, you're trying to bring his blood upon us. Stephen is bringing it right back around to that.

He's bringing the point right back home. You are guilty. They were guilty of killing the prophets that foretold the Messiah's coming.

You're guilty of killing the Messiah. Now, that was not. A message that they wanted to hear.

And the response. Shows you how deeply it infuriated them. Verse 53, who, having received a law by the disposition of angels and have not kept it.

So he says, you killed the Messiah, you break the law. And when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed on him with their teeth. So they just went absolutely berserk.

They leapt on him and they began to bite him. They gnashed on him with their teeth. It could be just a figure of speech, but it also could be literal.

They were so filled with indignation. And, you know, sometimes. The conviction of the spirit results in different kinds of responses.

And here we see that response that led them to drive Stephen out and to and to kill him. When we're sharing the word of God with people. We need to remember that we're not always going to get the most.

Warm response from them. You know, we tend to think that if the response is negative, maybe we said something wrong, we probably said something right. Because when people get convicted of sin, man, it it hurts, it hits home.

And a lot of times the initial response of a person is is very different than what we desire. You know, we wanted to say, oh, you're right. I am a sinner.

That's so true. Can we pray right now and can I be forgiven? And I mean, you know, that's the ideal thing. And sometimes that happens.

But sometimes the initial response is not like that at all. About a year and a half ago, when I was back over in England. We were having to get together and some people came and this one young girl came in and I recognized her and I wasn't quite sure about all the details of the background or anything.

And so, you know, we we began a conversation. We started talking and then she kind of reminded me of how it was that I was familiar with her. And she said to me, she said, the first time I heard you, I hated your guts.

She said, I hated you, I hated everything you said, I wanted to just come up to you and say I hate you. And, you know, she said I was drunk and I was doing drugs and, you know, she was into all this life style of sin. And what I said obviously convicted her and she hated it.

But the wonderful thing is that she was telling me that we were just rejoicing together, that she was saved and she was seeking the Lord. And now she's serving the Lord. She's leading worship in one of our churches there in England.

But that's the way it is sometimes when the great revivals, you know, we talk about revival and we think about the outpouring of the spirit and we pray for that and and we long to see that. But, you know, when the great revivals took place, a lot of times the initial response to the preachers was absolute hostility. You read the history of the 18th century revival with John Wesley and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield and all these people, these guys were taken by the mob sometimes and they were, you know, lifted up above the mob and paraded through the town and dumped in the, you know, dumped in the frozen little ponds and things like that.

And they were abused radically, but they kept preaching. They kept coming back to the same people that were abusing them. And finally, the sinners got tired and they broke down and they got saved.

So here are these men. They're filled with indignation and they come upon Stephen. They gnash upon him with their teeth, but he being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven and he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.

And he said, behold, I see the heavens open and the son of man standing on the right hand of God. And then they cried out with a loud voice and they stopped their ears and they ran up on him with one accord. Oh, they just couldn't handle that.

Remember what Jesus said? This is so reminiscent of what Jesus had said to them. Remember, they said the high priest, he said to Jesus, he said, I adjure thee by the living God to tell me whether or not thou art the Christ. And Jesus said, it is as you say, and hereafter you shall see the son of man at the right hand of power.

This is the same crowd. And what's Stephen saying? He's saying, I see heaven open and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Oh, this just blew their tops.

How dare he make such a claim? He was doing the same thing that Jesus did. And of course, when Jesus responded to the high priest and he said that, they said, it's blasphemy. What further need have we of witnesses? That was it.

He blasphemed. He said he was the Messiah. He said he was going to be at the right hand of God.

And so Stephen is just repeating what the Lord said. But I want you to notice something. Jesus is standing on the right hand of God.

Jesus is normally sitting on the right hand of God. Remember when he ascended back into heaven, he ascended to sit at the right hand of the father. And there he sits waiting till his enemies are made his footstool.

But on this occasion, Stephen says, behold, I see heaven open and Jesus standing. And I think that this was. The Lord's.

Standing for the entrance of his first martyr into the heavenly realm, Jesus was standing to greet Stephen as he arrived in heaven as the first martyr of the Christian church, and so they cried out with a loud voice, they stopped their ears, they ran up on him with one accord. They cast him out of the city and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul, and they stoned Stephen.

Who was calling upon God and saying, Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit, and he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this. He fell asleep.

Amazing. Stephen, so much like Jesus here in his testimony before the Sanhedrin, so much like Jesus in his response to his persecutors. Like Jesus, he says, Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge.

He's full of the Holy Spirit, of course, and God is giving him that grace at that time. And although Stephen was the first martyr, the witness of Stephen in his proclamation to the Sanhedrin and in his going to his death like he did, that was really probably, well, I think without argument, that was the key point of his whole ministry. Because there was a person observing the whole thing, and that person will later on become the Apostle Paul.

But in many ways, I think he would really pick up in a sense where Stephen left off. So Stephen's the first martyr, but the emphasis is not so much on, you know, the fact that he was killed, but what transpired during Stephen giving his final act of service to the Lord. You know, we think of a martyr, we think of somebody being killed and that's, oh, my goodness, you know, they're killing Christians and all.

And it is a frightening thing. It is a horrible thing in many ways. But, you know, from the other side of it, it's all part of the way God works to accomplish his will.

And so when a person dies for their faith, we often think we often concentrate on that side of it. Oh, the death and oh, what a tragedy. You know how horrible and, you know, what a dreadful thing.

And how could this have happened? And if only our government would have intervened and we need to get in touch with the Congress and they need to stop this from going on and all, you know, those kinds of things go on from the human side, understandably, to some degree. But from the heavenly side, this is just part of what God's doing. This is part of his work.

And from the heavenly side, it's not like, oh, no, wait, wait, they're stoning Stephen. What do we do now? This wasn't supposed to happen. No, this is part of the plan.

Because there's a person that God is dealing with, and this guy is tough, this guy is hard hearted, this guy is vicious, and it's the testimony of a fearless guy like Stephen who stands in the midst of this opposition and does not in any way flinch, even though he knows what's coming. This is undoubtedly what contributed to Saul of Tarsus ultimate surrender of his life to Christ. This is the beginning point, I think.

Of God beginning to deal with Saul, and when we come to the conversion of Saul in chapter nine, Jesus will ask him a question. He will say to him, Saul, isn't it hard for you to kick against the goads? And the implication behind that question is that Saul has been resisting the pressure from the Lord to surrender himself. And that pressure, I think, began on this very day when he stood there as a witness.

When he stood there watching the garments of those who were stoning Stephen as he was watching the whole thing transpire and as he was watching Stephen's fearlessness and how he embraced death for Christ and how he lifted up his head to heaven, all of this stuff, no doubt it just impacted him so powerfully. And this began, I would think, that deep work of the spirit in Saul's life. And it's interesting how Luke just sort of starts to pave the way here as the as the author of Acts.

He starts to pave the way into the story of Saul of Tarsus, the great apostle Paul. And by just mentioning him here. They laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And he doesn't tell us any more at this point, but he does go on to talk about the subsequent persecution that developed as a result of this. And so Saul was consenting, it says in chapter eight, verse one, unto the death of Stephen. Now, because it says he was consenting and because on another occasion later on in his life, as Paul would share his testimony, he actually uses a term where he says, I cast my vote against them because of that.

Many people believe that Saul was actually a member of this group, this council, this council was known as the Sanhedrin. It was made up of 70 elders and it was a mixture, as we've I think pointed out before, of Pharisees and Sadducees, the two religious groups in the country. The the Pharisees were the more biblically oriented and traditionalist.

The Sadducees were the liberals of the day. They were more politically minded and they had all kinds of problems with the scriptures. They denied the inerrancy of the scripture and the authority.

They denied the supernatural aspects to it. They denied that there was an afterlife. But but these two groups of people came together to make up the ruling body in the country.

And it is possible that Saul was actually part of that ruling body, as it says here, he was consenting unto the death. It seems to imply that he was one of that group that was agreeing that Stephen should be put to death. And at that time, there was a great persecution against the church, which was at Jerusalem.

And they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles and devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house and hailing men and women, committed them to prison. Therefore, they that were scattered.

They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. Now. Things are going just great in Jerusalem.

The church is growing, people are being added. There's that immediate hostility from the the council that keeps coming their way. But they you know, they overcome it and they continue to obey the Lord and and good things are happening.

But at this point. Nobody's really thought. About anything beyond Jerusalem, they've, in a sense, forgotten.

About the extent of the commission. Remember, the commission was Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the earth. They're just settled down in Jerusalem.

Things are going great in Jerusalem. We're all happy in Jerusalem. Everybody's coming to Jerusalem.

The Lord's working, the spirits being poured out. People are getting saved. And if you wanted to get saved, you kind of went to Jerusalem to do it.

But you see, the Lord wanted them to go out of Jerusalem. Not to just insist that everybody come into Jerusalem, the Lord wanted them to go out of Jerusalem. The things were going so well and it was so comfortable.

And so. Cozy there in Jerusalem, in the church, all the believers were there, thousands had been added by now, and it was just a wonderful thing, this new Christian community. But the Lord has to get them out.

And so the Lord allows the persecution to come and he uses the persecution to scatter them. And as they go, they do what they were supposed to be doing in the first place. They start spreading the word as they're going.

You know, we oftentimes go through similar kinds of things. It's really easy to get comfortable, isn't it? It's really easy to settle down. And yet the Lord wants to keep stirring us up.

And so just about the time we settle down and everything starts to become so easy, the Lord will he'll stir things up. But it's not to just, you know, frustrate us or to make things difficult for us, it's to get us to grow.

It's to stretch us, it's to challenge us into new areas of faith and new things of the spirit.

And that is true on an individual level, and it's true sometimes on a more collective level. Sometimes the Lord will stir things up in a church, things will happen and you'll say, man, I don't like that. I don't like the way that happened over there.

I'm leaving. I'm going to another church or I'm just getting out of town. The Lord might use those things sometimes to actually send you somewhere else because he's got something else he wants to do.

Years ago, when we were pastoring down in Vista, California. You know, there'd come times when people would something would happen and you have these exoduses from the church. And, you know, five or six different families, they'd come in and tell me what they didn't like about me in the church.

And then they'd say, we're leaving, you know, and they'd go off and OK, you know, whatever. What can you do about it? But, you know, the interesting thing at the time, we were about the only church in the area that was, you know, the biblically based expository, you know, kind of church that we're all familiar with. But at that time, new churches were starting to crop up.

And inevitably, what would happen is these people would go to these other churches and having been trained and even in the ministry at our church, they'd come along and they'd be a real blessing to this new church that was getting started. They'd have some instant leadership and they would become, you know, the helpers and the workers in that church. And so as the years would go by, I began to just see it as, you know what, it's just a way of God getting people out to different things.

And at one point, I remember kind of just mentally thinking about the churches that had been raised up in the county and just sort of almost, you know, chuckling at the thought that. In the leadership in every one of those churches, there are people that were at one time in our fellowship and part of the leadership here. And they had all kinds of different reasons for leaving, but the Lord used all of that and he got them out there and he used them to help in other ministries and things.

And sometimes the Lord will use adversity to get us going in new directions. And that's what he does here. He uses this adversity and he scatters the church in Jerusalem.

He reduces it. But in doing so, he spreads the work and he gets done what he wants to do. He wants this thing to go beyond Jerusalem.

He wants it to go to Judea. He wants it to go to Samaria. He wants it to go all the way to the ends of the earth.

And so I think the lesson there for us is to just remember that when we get too comfy. When we get too cozy, when we just get too settled into something that we might be missing out on things the Lord wants to do. And we need to I think in some ways we need to keep ourselves stirred up.

We just need to always be open and always be seeking the Lord and always be saying, Lord, what's going on? What do you have now? And and just available. And sometimes the Lord doesn't, you know, he doesn't even consult us about it. He just does things and then it happens and it's beyond our control.

But he gets done what he wants to do through those things. So these people. They were scattered, but they went everywhere preaching the word.

That's what they did. They went everywhere preaching the word. They went everywhere just proclaiming the good news.

And as they went, they found that there was receptivity as they were going. The people were open. And, you know, that's.

That's the way it is today, too. And I say this not to put anybody under any sort of a guilt trip. But just to heighten our awareness to the fact that.

You know, there are so many people that are open to the gospel, but they've never heard it because no one's ever told them. Because all the ones that know the gospel. Are really fat and happy right where they're at.

And, you know, we need to stir ourselves up a little bit. And we need to remember what life is about and why we're here and what what is this thing, the church and what is Christianity and what is the meaning of my life? And I mentioned on Tuesday night when we did our New Year's Eve service, a statistic I read just this past week that there are 350 million Christians in Africa. But anyone who's been to Africa or anyone who knows anything about Africa knows this, that those 350 million Christians are starving for the word of God.

The tragedy of Christianity in Africa is that it's Christianity without a Bible for the most part, and that when a person comes and just brings the word and begins to teach it. The stuff that we have here that we take for granted, that we just think that this is what happens in every church, no, it's not, but that that's the goal. Jesus said, go into the world and make disciples of all the nations.

And here we are tonight, and again, like I said, I'm not trying to put a guilt trip on anybody or trying to say, you got to get out of here and go to Africa. But what I am saying is this, all of us should be open to anything we should be just here saying, Lord, what do you want to do? Yes, we're happy here. Yes, it's wonderful.

It's great to be a Christian in Southern California. It's wonderful to be part of Calvary Chapel. You got it all right here.

And that's great. But maybe the Lord would say, you know, I want to send you somewhere else where they don't have it and I've given you enough now you've been fed, you've been equipped, you've sat year after year after year. You know the Bible as well as any pastor.

And God might be saying, you know what, I want you to start giving it out now. And it might not be that you immediately jump up and sell everything and run off to another country, but maybe the Lord would say, I want you to open your home for a Bible study or I want you to get a place at work and I want you to start teaching the word to the Christians there where you're working. Or I want you to just get a few friends and go over to the local Starbucks or whatever and just have a little fellowship and share the word with each other, because I want to bring people your way and I want to minister through you.

You see, that's the thing we have to fight against that, that thing of just all huddling together and, you know, the Christian club and keep everybody else out. We got to remember that this has got to get out. We've got to spread it.

Because the vast majority of people in the world have not heard the good news, the billion souls in China, most of them have not heard the gospel. But there's a tremendous hunger and a moving of God's spirit right now, and, you know, it's almost anywhere you you want to imagine it's the same. It's the same situation.

And I believe that the Lord wants to do something in these days where it's a it's a new time of sending a new time of of getting people out into this great harvest field that Jesus told us about. Let's not wait for some great persecution thing to scatter us. Let's just be open and available.

And but maybe going back as we close, just, you know, on a more of a personal level, maybe your life is kind of. Been turned upside down, maybe your world's been turned upside down personally, maybe your secure job is no longer secure. Maybe the situation that you've been comfortably enjoying for years has all of a sudden just been turned on its head.

And perhaps the Lord would be saying, I've got something fresh for you, I've got something new. You never know. But a lot of times that's what happens when the Lord allows things to get turned over in our lives.

It's because he wants to rearrange the furniture, so to speak. He wants to come in and he wants to reconstruct our lives. He wants to set us on a new course.

He's got a new plan. And it doesn't matter if you're 20 or if you're 50. There's so much to be done.

There's so many people that don't know the Lord. And I would be willing to bet myself that there are many right in our own congregation that God would want to stir up and send out somewhere with his word. My friend Phil, who's staying with me right now, he's living over in England and Phil was very comfortably managing a very large surf shop in Florida.

In the sunshine and just, you know, living about as easy a life as you could in one sense. And he called me one day because he'd been on the mission field over in Russia for a while and then he'd been back and he'd been praying about going back out. And he called me one day and he said, I'm thinking about going back to Russia.

And I said, no, don't go to Russia. Come to England. I said, I got some surfers and I need someone to come and minister to him.

And so he prayed about it and we began to seek the Lord and the Lord put it on his heart to come. And so he moved over and, you know, as he decided to move over, I said, guess what? I'm moving back. And so, you know, he said, I already knew that the Lord told me.

And but, you know, he's gone over and he's been ministering and we're just talking today. And some of the things he was saying to me just were really striking me in my heart. And he was talking about how in the past couple of years he's taken about 50 people individually and gone through a discipleship program with him.

Just take a little book on, you know, one to one discipleship. And he's done that with 50 people in this community. And he was just telling me how these 50 people, their lives have been revolutionized.

And now every one of them are at a place of just saying, where have I been all my life? What have I been doing? Some of them have been Christians for 20 years and they're thinking, I've been a Christian for 20 years and I didn't I didn't even know anything about what I believed. And now they've gotten a taste of the word and they've gone through the discipleship and they're listening to tapes. They're listening to Pastor Chuck.

They're listening to me. They're listening to Bob Coy. They're listening to the different.

And they're just getting the word of God is taking over their lives, transforming their lives. And these people are going to transform their communities. But it's radical to see what the word of God does in people's lives.

And you see, when God instills his word in us, it's not only so we can enjoy the richness of it, although it is that it's so that we can pass it on to others and bless others with it. And it's just a chain reaction. It's a domino effect that just goes from one person to another, to another, to another.

And so maybe your life's been a bit disturbed, will look for some good thing in it that God has a new direction, perhaps a whole new plan that you haven't even conceived of yet. But know this, that the call is still the same. The task has not changed.

We're still called to take the gospel to the world, just like they were. God kicked them out of Jerusalem, said, let's get this thing going. And it's not finished yet.

It's still going. And we get to be part of it. We are part of it.

Let's be part of it in the truest sense, by just seeking the Lord and saying, God, here am I, work in me, use me. And remember where we began tonight. Stephen was an ordinary guy.

He was just serving in the church. He was helping out at the food pantry when the people came in needing food, but he was a man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. And God was doing miracles through him.

That's you. That's me. That's all of us, because God is no respecter of persons.

Let's seek him. For those things in our life, let's pray. Father, we thank you that the story of Acts is just a picture of what you did and what you want to keep doing on throughout the age until the Lord comes to take us home.

And so, Lord, we pray that in our church and in our personal lives that you, Lord, would be working. Lord, that you would use us. That we would be those who bear your word, that precious seed, Lord, that we might go forth as that sower scattering the seed and, Lord, seeing those fruits produced by it.

We thank you for the work of your spirit and your word in our lives. And, Lord, we pray that you would work by your spirit, through your word, Lord, through us. And, Lord, I just pray that you would speak to hearts tonight about things that you want to do.

It's a new year, Lord. And a new vision, perhaps coming to people. Lord, give them wisdom, give them clarity.

Help them to step out in faith and, Lord, be glorified in our lives in the weeks and the months and in the year to come. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

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