

What Would You Be Willing to Die For?

by Nigel Lee

The sermon explores the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and what we can learn from his life and death about living a life of quality and being willing to die for our faith.

Duration: 30:53

Scripture: Acts 7:48-49, Acts 7:51-52, Acts 7:54-56

Topics: "Martyrdom"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the qualities of Stephen, a man who lived a quality life day by day. Stephen was known for his deep understanding and ability to explain Scripture, which is a challenge for many. The speaker emphasizes the importance of being able to give a Bible overview of various themes and teachings, as Stephen did when he was put on trial. Stephen was also a man of great courage, willing to defend the Gospel and the liberty it brings, even if it meant facing persecution and death. The sermon concludes by highlighting Stephen's unwavering faith and the ultimate reward he received when the God of glory appeared to him, confirming the truth of his words.

Transcript

William Soter, John Badby, Sir John Oldcastle, John Frith, Andrew Hewitt, Thomas Bilney, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer. Men and women executed in this country for loving Christ. These were people who died for the right to own and read the Bible.

You see a row of them there on the radiators. These were people who died for the right to trust in Jesus alone for salvation from our sins. These were men and women who died for the right, the right to believe that bread and wine in the communion are not magicked into the body and blood of Christ, but remain bread and wine, symbols to the eye of faith of what the Lord Jesus has completely accomplished for us on the cross.

And as Dave was reminding us, in many parts of the world still to this day people die for the same faith. In Nepal, in Indonesia, we've had the reading in Nigeria, in Pakistan, in China and so on. What we're doing this morning now is looking at the story of Stephen who was the very first of this long line, the first Christian martyr.

And while we do so it is worth remembering that during the 20th century more people were put to death for these beliefs than in all the previous 19 centuries put together. In other words what we're studying today is

actually getting worse. In the first three centuries after Christ there were ten separate attempts in the Roman Empire to persecute the Christian church into oblivion, utterly destroy it.

And at times the whole undertaking that we're involved in looked very shaky. That was the view from earth. Of course the view from heaven looked different.

And in the reading that we're going to have shortly we shall see the Lord Jesus himself standing up in heaven and watching Stephen laying down his life. The first in that long line of murdered servants that continues unbroken to the present day. I've come I think over the years to believe that persecution of Christians could return to this country in quite an open way.

Certainly in some parts of our national life and in the many overlapping cultures that make up the UK today. It is very and increasingly difficult to be a follower of Christ, to believe in the things that we believe and to stand for the Lord. What can we learn and how could we be ready if such a thing were to come in our lifetime? Stephen as we learnt last week had just been appointed in the early church to practical duties.

He was to stand against racism which was creeping into the early church. He was to make sure that the distribution of the food and the other supplies probably that the early Christians were generously amassing to give away to those that had little. That that was done fairly.

But he was to do it in such a way as to enable the apostles to carry out their duties because they had another we may say higher responsibility to feed the people. Stephen would take care of the feeding of the widows so that the apostles could be free to feed the people of God with the word of God. And what everybody remembered about this man was his fullness.

He overflowed. I mean we read in the early part of chapter 6 of Acts that he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He was full of faith and the Holy Spirit in verse 5. We read he was full of God's grace and power and when Stephen preached there was tremendous impact.

What we're going to do now is read from Acts chapter 6 into 7 and then from the end of 7. Chapter 6 verse 8. Now Stephen a man full of God's grace and power did great wonders and miraculous signs amongst the people. Opposition arose however from members of the synagogue of the freed men as it was called. Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Silesia and Asia who began to argue with Stephen.

But they couldn't stand up to the wisdom or the spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say we've heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God. So they stirred up the people.

And the elders and the teachers of the law they seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified this fellow never stopped speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs of Moses handed down to us.

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen. And they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him are these charges true? To this he replied brothers and fathers listen to me.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran. Leave your country and your people God said and go to the land that I will show you. We're not going to read the rest of chapter 7. Stephen takes them through their Old Testament history drawing out of it two central lessons which we will look at in a moment.

See far from being a repudiator of the Old Testament as had been alleged Stephen's entire message is based on the authority of the Old Testament. And he goes through the lessons that come from the lives of Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Israel's rebellions and the building of the temple and so on. Come over to chapter 7 verse 48 and see how the sermon finishes.

Verse 48 however the most high does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me says the Lord? Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? You stiff neck people with uncircumcised hearts and ears.

You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one.

And now you have betrayed and murdered him. You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it. And when they heard this they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

But Stephen full of the Holy Spirit looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look he said I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears and yelling at the tops of their voices they all rushed at him.

Dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him Stephen prayed Lord Jesus receive my spirit.

And then he fell on his knees and cried out Lord do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this he fell asleep. And Saul was there giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Stephen is facing the Sanhedrin this was the supreme Jewish court if you like and governing council in the land.

These were the same men who only a short time before had condemned Stephen's master Jesus. And there is the same mob outside yelling and shouting and putting pressure. Stephen is charged with two things.

He is charged first of all with blaspheming against Moses and against God. And then secondly he is charged with trying to change the customs and the traditions that Moses had given to God's people. These were very serious charges.

About the most serious that there were carrying the death penalty in Jewish law. Although the Romans didn't normally allow the Jews to carry out their own death sentences without Roman permission. And

what happened here actually degenerated from a legal proceeding to eventually a mob lynching.

They were so furious with what Stephen was saying that they simply stoned him to death without consulting anybody. The blasphemy charge was completely fictitious. It was a lie.

It was made up by false witnesses. Stephen was a man full of God's spirit. And God even made his face shine like an angel as he stood to speak.

In other words God made him look like Moses himself as he had come down from the mountain carrying those tablets of law. What an astonishing riposte from God himself to this charge that Stephen was somehow against Moses and God. Made him glow like an angel.

It's an astonishing thing. We had read to us this morning of situations in many Islamic countries today where false charges of blasphemy against Mohammed or the Quran are invented out of pure spite in order to bring about the death of innocent Christians. John Stott in his gentle scholarly way has said that when arguments fail mud has often seemed an excellent substitute.

Well this was pretty harsh stuff. The second charge that Stephen faced of challenging the customs and traditions of Moses is absolutely true. It was.

But listen to his defence. He says as I implied basically two things. This is Stephen's defence.

Number one he says God is a living God. He's on the move. He moves forward.

He's not static or fixed. From time to time in the unfolding revelation of God's mind and purposes for his people on earth he moves forward. Stephen is going to choose to select occasions from well known Old Testament history when God spoke particularly outside the borders of Israel, of Palestine.

And he moved the people forward. The God of glory appeared. This is the start of the whole thing.

Verse two. The God of glory appeared to Abraham. And God said get up.

Advance Abraham. Pilgrimage. Move on.

Experience some more of my way to provide for you. Leave paganism. Leave the security of your past and your background and your family and move to the land I'm going to show you.

In verse 30 we saw, or we would have seen if we'd read it. The God of glory appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Leave here.

Go back to Egypt. Lead my people out. We're moving on.

God appeared to Israel in the pillars of fire and clouds and in the glory at Sinai to move them on. In verses 49 and 50 Isaiah is quoted as reminding Israel that even though God's glory had come down on that temple, magnificent temple that Solomon had built, you can't confine God in a box. Even a magnificent box.

Even from the beginning. They should have known that God's heart was for the world. God so loved, what? The world.

That he gave his only son. That whoever, whoever believed and trusted in him should not perish but have everlasting life. God is a God, says Stephen, who moves on.

Be ready. Every true believer actually knows something of this experience. Not bright lights or fire and burning bushes, but the sense of God working, God coming close, God revealing himself, God speaking, our hearts quickening, something of value and importance is about to happen.

Believers know what it is to know God come near and beginning to move you on in faith. God is a living God. If you read your scriptures right, says Stephen, you would know that.

He moves on. And secondly, on every occasion God sent a saviour to Israel or a prophet with commands or directions, he was persecuted and rejected and killed. This opposition wasn't loyalty to the truth that God had given.

It was because of rebellion. You are deeply resistant to the Holy Spirit, said Stephen, very courageously. And you always have been.

Even to the extent of putting the righteous one, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah to death when he came. When God sent messengers, building on what he had said before, calling the people to move forward, moving them on to a higher level of understanding and faith, they killed the messengers and they dug in to stay where they were. What is happening in Acts as we study through it? It's not now a question, as we pass this midpoint in chapter 6, it's not now a question of whether Jesus is the Son of God.

Peter had stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached that powerfully and many were convinced and they repented of having shouted, we will not have him. That had been the issue in the first few chapters. But now we move on to something different.

Now it's a question of how Christian worship and practice relates to other religions, here Judaism or any other majority religion. And here we begin to hit some of the things that those early Christians were willing to die for. See Stephen had been brought up as a Jew, devout Jew.

The only way to approach God is to come through an animal sacrifice. And you have to come through a particular priesthood. Don't think you can just come as you like.

You come through a particular God appointed priesthood and they will go into places where you cannot come and represent you, do the business for you. Stephen had been brought up to believe that God's highest goal for a Gentile would have been to convert to Judaism. There was no other way.

And now here at the end of chapter 7 Stephen is giving his life for what now marks the Christian church as distinctive. We don't need Jewish sacrifices or any sacrifices of animals to take away sin. Christ has done it all.

No more sacrifices. Christ has done it all. There is full, free forgiveness of sin.

Stephen died for that. We don't need, secondly, special priests to act as intermediaries for us. Jesus is our high priest in heaven and in fact all true believers here on earth have become priests themselves.

I will myself never again accept a system where only certain ordained persons can represent us before God. It is not biblical Christianity. God has moved on.

There was a time when that was so but it is not so now. Stephen died for this. We don't have to come to certain buildings to seek and find God.

The whole world is his temple, says the scripture. I mean at this they couldn't take any more and they rushed him yelling and dragged him out of the city and stoned him. He died for these distinctives.

Our gospel freedoms to worship God in spirit and in truth. Supposing a day is to come in this country where, for instance, let's say we were all being compelled by law to become Anglicans. I think this kind of thing has happened where the government of the day particularly in communist countries in the last century would try and corral and herd people into one religious block.

It's happened in China. They were all supposed to join a particular kind of church. It's happened in Russia and so on.

They say it's just easier to organize everybody that way. Would you go along with it or would you resist? And where would you let your resistance take you? If you were being compelled back into a Jewish form of Christianity where there is a special priesthood separated off from everybody else who is called the laity how strongly do you believe in that? Or would you accept a system where the Lord's Supper is being turned back into a sacrifice? Isn't there remembrance? It has become again a sacrifice. Or where temples are divided with a screen or a wall or a curtain or something into a place that is a special place of priests and then another place for everybody else.

Or where there are certain days in the calendar that are made for certain special feasts of this or that and they're different from other days. Would you accept that kind of stuff? Or where babies are miraculously made Christians by something being done to them of which they are totally unaware. Would you accept that? See agreeing to these things and going along with them can eat away at our understanding of and enjoyment of Biblical salvation.

What would we die for? See those names that were read out at the beginning in the history of this country they died to uphold those truths. Or supposing we altogether face increasingly an aggressive hostility against Biblical Christianity. I sometimes think I can hear the sound of it just over the horizon but it's getting closer.

Just think of the hostility that there was within the last few months against the Evangelicals around the time of the proposed Anglican appointment of a certain bishop to a post in Reading. I can remember talking to a BBC producer as that story was breaking and was hitting the headlines in all the press. He was furious.

He was unbelievably bitter and angry against people like me. We were identified with the evil people in this particular situation. Constant barbs in the media the mockery and the invective against Evangelicals.

It would never be allowed against any other faith group in this country. But against Christians, well, they're fair game. You see what's coming? The prevention of certain broadcasting rights to certain Christian groups.

The difficulties you face in your career as a surgeon if you're unwilling to perform certain kinds of abortions. I was talking to Ken Nielsen just a few days ago about how down in Plymouth, is it? The Gideons are facing tremendous pressure and problem right now because the Gideon Bibles that have been placed in the university halls of residence they want to get rid of the lot of them. Apparently on equal

opportunities legislation if you can get your head around that.

In our universities the hostilities to a Christian point of view in some academic disciplines is vicious, particularly in English faculties or philosophy faculties. This has changed within the last 10 or 15 years. The exclusion of certain Christian unions like the one in Warwick from any status on campus.

And the banning of evangelism. Never mind about European rights of freedom of speech we will ban and prevent Christians from sharing the same gospel that Stephen was sharing and that all those men and women at the beginning that we read out were sharing. This is no more than is faced by many of our brethren around the world.

I remember speaking in a pastor's conference in the Pokhara Valley in Nepal a few years ago. There were about 30 men who pastor these churches. And I talked to them, we had a day together we had lunch together and so on.

Half of them had done time for believing what you believe. These were battle scarred men. In our day the church there is Friday so two days ago they were preaching this same gospel.

I think it's coming back. If it comes back I would be a marked man and so would many of you. Do you believe in our statement of faith? Would you die for it? Would you die for the belief that Jesus is the unique son of God who will come back to judge the world? That the Bible is God's authorised inspired word? That salvation is a free gift to the repentant? Would you die for it? If you had to? For our call to world evangelism? We can read these stories and we can admire these far off people but what are we supposed to learn? How should we live? You look at your little children growing up.

Some of us are of an age where this might not come in our lifetime but bring up children and know that they too are going to have to have the backbone and the courage the guts, the humility the understanding of Gospel and Scripture when you're gone and they live. What can we learn from Stephen? Let's come to a finish. The first Christian to live and die facing this.

Three things very quickly. Number one, he lived. He was known for it.

He lived all his life. He lived when he was distributing food when he was bringing peace within the church when he was organising a practical service duty. The man lived and spoke as someone who was just full of the Holy Spirit.

Even right at the end of his life in verse 55 of chapter 7 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. Right through to the end. He lived a life of sheer quality.

Gracious and efficient in his service. Hugely effective in his evangelism. Do you remember? Have you ever read anywhere or come across these two phrases? Being fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ and reaching lost people in the power of the Spirit.

Ever come across that? Those are our sort of mission statements, aren't they? We put these on our notice sheet every day. I don't know whether you read it. This is the way Stephen lived.

Full of the Holy Spirit. Reaching lost people in the power of the Spirit. Will anything less than this do? 1 Peter 2 verse 12 One of the other apostles says Live such good lives among pagans that though they accuse you of wrong doing they may see your good deeds.

Just right words isn't enough. We need now an apologetic that people can see. But then so they did in the first century.

Though they may argue against you they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Live a quality life day by day. Stephen had thought deeply about Scripture and was able to explain it.

This is challenging, isn't it? Could we give, if suddenly put on trial something of a Bible overview of some of the great themes? It would be helpful if you know, if you're driving along somewhere take a theme, take mission, take kingdom take priests, take the glory of God take whatever, take the land and what do I know from Scripture? How could I give a Bible overview of that, from the word of God? Stephen was a man who when suddenly faced with the need to be on trial for his life could take them from Abraham to the present day and bring out the word of God for the hour. He had thought and reflected deeply on the word of God. What a challenge! Such people are going to be needed.

Thirdly, he was a man of great courage great courage when it came to defending the gospel and the liberty it brings. He saw the issues clearly and he wouldn't flinch. Finally, did you notice that when Stephen started his speech at the beginning of chapter 7 he stands up and he says and they all knew it was true he said the God of glory appeared to our father, our father Abraham in Mesopotamia before he ever went off to heaven the God of glory appeared.

But what happens at the end? The God of glory appears to Stephen. The thing he'd been talking about was real and became even more real. This is the end of this man's journey.

And suddenly it is as if heaven rolls back and he sees the Lord Jesus his saviour rising to his feet to watch and to welcome his servant coming home. What he had said was true. And before long that same God of glory would appear again in fact, chapter 9 to Saul God moving the workers die but the work goes on God would meet Saul on the road and appear to him and again another great step forward.

So, Stephen, let's learn the lessons let's be courageous people humble he was a great man full of the Holy Spirit ready to explain the gospel afraid of no one forgiving his enemies Father, forgive them and welcomed into glory. God our Father, you see the future we only see through a glass very darkly. Help us to be not just hearers of the word but hearers and doers.

Lord, we pray that we in this church would be prepared for whatever faces each of our members that we would encourage and we would challenge and stimulate and teach and love and pray for one another as many go out tomorrow to put their fingers in different mangles to get shot at and misunderstood and spoken against. Oh Lord God, please may we be trained to live lives that are full of your spirit that are rich in your word and unflinching in courage. For Christ's sake.

Amen.

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