STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

Acts 6:8-8:3
Key Verse: 7:59

"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'"

We learned in the previous chapters that the apostles showed an uncompromising spirit of devotion to the ministry of the word of God. In order to serve this ministry, the twelve apostles decided to leave the business of food distribution to seven growing leaders in the church. In reality, these men handled both the church business and the defense of the church. Today's passage deals mainly with the ministry of Stephen, one of the seven. Stephen was zealous to serve the widows in the church. He was even more zealous to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the face of bitter opposition, Stephen was martyred for his faith. As we study this passage, we want to think about the point and content of Stephen's Bible teaching. May God help us to study the Bible and teach the Bible to others with a spirit of martyrdom, like Stephen.

I. Stephen's speech on God's history (6:8-7:53)

After the ascension of Christ, while the twelve apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, the Jewish rulers were filled with jealousy. They felt threatened by the growing Christian church. They had arrested the apostles and wanted to kill them for filling Jerusalem with the name of Jesus Christ through their teaching. There was a growing sense however, among a number of the Jewish leaders, that in oppressing the followers of Christ, they would find themselves on the wrong side of history and in opposition to God. In fact, a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. The high priest and his family members relented and let the apostles go. However, this was not the end of the story. Jerusalem was a political hotbed, and nationalistic feelings were rampant, especially among the Jews of the diaspora,
that is, those Jews who had been scattered throughout the Gentile world. There was an organization called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, comprised of members from northern Africa and Asia. While the apostles and Stephen proclaimed the fulfillment of God's promises through Jesus Christ, and the hope of salvation for everyone who believed, the Synagogue promoted Moses, the law and the temple as the cornerstones of their Judaistic, nationalistic message. The religious leaders more than likely supported the Synagogue in their efforts to discredit Stephen and his message.

These men began to argue with Stephen. Many of them were firebrands and heated debaters, but they could not stand up against Stephen's wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke (10). Frustrated, they then seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against the holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this holy place and change the customs Moses handed down to us" (13,14). As the religious leaders had done with Jesus, they brought political charges against Stephen in order to destroy him and silence his message.

Why did they talk about the temple and the Law of Moses in order to denounce Stephen? To the Jews, the temple was the place where God was present, and was the visible sign of God's choosing of Judah and favor on their nation. Moreover, the temple was the center of their culture and history. The Law of Moses was also important to them. They thought the Law of Moses was their unique possession. They thought of themselves as disciples of Moses and students of God's law. God intended that they be Bible teachers for the whole world. But they failed to do so. The Synagogue members could not refute Stephen's understanding of the Bible and witness concerning Jesus. So they attacked Stephen politically, claiming that his teaching was a threat to these Jewish icons. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, to see if he would be scared to death. But to their dismay, his face was shining like the face of an angel (15). At that moment,
Stephen did not think of himself; he thought of his people and gave them a speech about God's history. He wanted them to know God's great purpose for them and to see that his purpose was fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

**First,** Abraham's obedience to God's calling (2-19). Look at verses 2,3. "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 I will show you.'" When God called Abraham, he had a plan to save and bless the world through one person, Abraham. God chose Abraham, who was a 75-year-old man with a serious life problem because he had no child. God commanded him to leave his country and his people and go to the promised land. Abraham obeyed God's command. He left his homeland in his old age and went to the promised land. But God gave him no inheritance, not even a foot of ground, nor did he give him a child to inherit his name. Still, Abraham believed God's promise, even when God told him that it would not happen for four hundred years. Later, God gave him Isaac, and, to Isaac, Jacob-- who became the father of the twelve patriarchs. Stephen told this story to remind them of God's purpose in choosing Abraham. It was to bless all peoples of all nations through him (Ge 12:3b; 22:18), because he was willing to obey God. It was also to show God's patience and faithfulness as he fulfilled his promises in history. As he had promised, God gave Abraham a son, Isaac, and a grandson, Jacob. Among the twelve sons of Jacob, Joseph was sold to Egypt because of his brothers' jealousy. But in this was God's providence to mold his people into a nation (9-16).

**Second,** Moses' obedience to God's calling (20-53). God saw that his people had grown into a nation in Egypt. God also saw that they had suffered under godless rulers. God called Moses to deliver his people from the hand of the Egyptian king and lead them into the promised land. Moses was born into the tragic situation of the Israelites when by the king's edict all newborn baby boys had to be thrown into the Nile river. But Moses' parents saw that he was no
ordinary child. They kept him safe until he could be put out. Then Pharoah's daughter found him and adopted him as her own son. He was raised as a prince, but he never forgot his Hebrew roots. One day, he murdered an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. He believed that he had been chosen to rescue his suffering people. But they rejected him, saying, "who made you ruler and judge over us?" Moses ran away and hid in the desert of Midian.

When God called Moses, he was already 80 years old, and he was used to a family-centered life, surrounded by his many sisters-in-law. His 40 long years of hermit life made him a man of few words. Moses thought he was living in a land of nobodies. But God called this Moses and said, "Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt" (33,34). This was the same Moses whom his own people had rejected, saying, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" God sent him to them as their ruler and deliverer. It was a very hard command for Moses to obey. But he obeyed God's command anyway. He accepted the leading of the Holy Spirit, though it meant hardship, suffering and endless discouragement as the shepherd of his people. When he obeyed God, God gave him strength to lead his people out of Egypt and to perform wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for 40 years in the desert. On Mount Sinai, God gave his people the Law of God through Moses, so that they could overcome their slave mentality and be raised as servants of God for all peoples of all nations (36-38). And Moses gave them God's promise to send a Savior from among their own people.

But the people of Israel did not humble themselves as Moses had before the Spirit of God. They refused to obey Moses. Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They longed for delicious food and comfortable apartments in Egypt. While Moses went up Mount Sinai, they told Aaron, Moses' spokesman, to make an idol in the form of a calf, and they began to
offer sacrifices to it. They did not realize God's purpose for them in bringing them to the wilderness. They brought the tabernacle of the Testimony to the promised land under the leadership of General Joshua, and they kept it until the time of King David. It was a source of national pride and unity, but they did not realize what it meant in God's history.

When God delivered his people from bondage in slavery, he had a great purpose for them. He intended to make them a priestly nation. In other words, God wanted the whole world to overflow with the knowledge of God through them. God wanted to bless all peoples of all nations through them. Exodus 19:5,6 says, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." How great God's purpose for them was! But they did not realize it.

The people of Israel in Jesus' time had the same problem. They also did not realize God's great purpose for them. Neither did they realize the meaning of the temple, nor did they realize the meaning of the Law of Moses. They thought they were the only people who possessed the temple of God. But the meaning of the temple of God was greater than they had thought. The temple was to be a place of prayer for all nations. Mark 11:17 says, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." But the Jewish rulers did not use the temple as a prayer house for all nations. What a great purpose the temple had, but they turned the temple into a market (Jn 2:16). Also, they did not know the true meaning of the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was truly great. But it was only a stage for the grace of God through his Son Jesus. Moreover, they did not know God's purpose for them as a chosen people. They did not know that God had made them his chosen people so as to fulfill his purpose for world salvation.

In the course of struggling for survival, they became so near-sighted that they lost the ability to think of the world as a whole. They were so bound by the present situation that they did
not know what they were doing. They persecuted the early Christians because they appeared to be a growing threat to their security and comfort. In short, their problem was that they had no sense of history. They saw everything in light of the present situation, not in view of God's history. They reacted emotionally when they felt their way of life was threatened, but they were not willing to listen to the Bible teaching that led them to repentance and God's world salvation purpose.

Stephen rebuked them for not living up to God's purpose for them. Look at verses 51,52. "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him..." They should have realized God's great purpose for them through Stephen's rebuke. But they did not.

II. The spirit of martyrdom (7:54-8:3)

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. At this moment, what was the content of Stephen's feelings? We learn three things from him.

First, Stephen's faith in Jesus. Look at verse 55. "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." At the crucial moment, Stephen did not look at their faces distorted with anger. Instead, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In short, he saw the kingdom of God. He saw that Jesus Christ is ruling the world standing at the right hand of God. While his body was racked with pain because of the stones, he knew he was dying physically, but he believed that Jesus is God who owns his life. So he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Second, Stephen's prayer. Evil men were most grieved to hear Stephen's speech. So they covered their ears, yelling at the top of
their voices. They rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The stones cut his flesh and broke his bones. Still, Stephen prayed for his people. Look at verse 60. "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep." Stephen was a man of prayer. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed for them exactly as Jesus had prayed (Lk 23:34). Let's read verses 59-60 again.

Third, Stephen's blood. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But they did not have to cry; though his body was killed, his life of faith remains forever influential on earth. His body was killed, but his spirit of martyrdom lives forever in the hearts of God's people. As we know well, the flesh counts for nothing, but the spirit is everything. There are many kinds of great spirits, such as the spirit of giving, the spirit of conquest and the spirit of victory before fighting. But the spirit of martyrdom is the greatest because it is the expression of one's love for God. Stephen's blood became an unquenchable inspiration to the early Christians, who were willing to die for Jesus' name's sake. Also, his blood begot St. Paul's conversion. Paul, when he was Saul, watched the moment of Stephen's martyrdom (8:1); he heard his prayer and couldn't forget it.

In this way, the church of Jesus survived vigorously in the adverse situation. In this way, the church of Jesus grew and grew, even though kingdoms rose and waned. In this passage we learn that God does not want us to be miserable because of our human situations. God does not want us to be near-sighted like the Jewish rulers. God not only wants us to overcome our human situation with faith, but also he wants us to live up to his great and glorious purpose for each of us. Most importantly, Stephen's martyrdom spirit influenced and gave birth to Saul's conversion. God also wants us to have the spirit of martyrdom. May God give us the spirit of martyrdom.