

Acts 6 (Part 2): 8-15 & Acts 7 • Stephen, the first Christian Martyr

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Life Bible Ministry

We're in the second part of chapter 6, and then we're going to go through all of chapter 7, Lord willing, because it's all really part of the same story.

You guys will remember last week we talked about the fact that there was a problem that arose in the early church, and it had to do with the issue of food not being distributed to some people again. They were living communally and they had to address it, which they did by the apostles telling the body to raise up some men to be in a leadership role to take care of that issue. And that issue that arose and their solution to that issue introduced us to a new section to the Book of Acts. Because prior to chapter 6 we've stayed, pretty much within the Hebraic or how do I say this, the cultural end of Jewishness in the early body of Christ that came from the more Hebrew speaking or Aramaic speaking. We call them Hebraic Jews.

With chapter 6, we're introduced to the fact that there were a lot of Jews who came to Christ who had a Grecian background and that was part of the issue we talked about last week. And one of the men that they raised up to take care of the problem was a man by the name of Stephen. And he's going to be front and center for the rest of what we're going to be dealing with here in chapter 6, and then on to chapter 7.

Begin reading with me, if you would please beginning at verse 8, Acts 6, verse 8. And it goes like this, *“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.”*⁹ *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia (take note of that) and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.*¹⁰ *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*¹¹ *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”*

*¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,*¹³ *and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,*¹⁴ *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of*

Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” We're going to pause there. Although we will go further here today, but let's pray shall we?

Father open our hearts we pray to the ministry of Your Word, to the grace that You give us through it. To understand the Scriptures, and then also Lord, to apply them. And that's our prayer and we ask that You would help us to do that here today.

We ask Father that You would help us to apprehend from these passages, what it is that You want to say to us today. Not only as individuals, Lord, but as a church, as a body, as a fellowship, as part of the bride of Christ.

We pray that You would give us all that we need. Lord, equip us through Your Word, we ask in Jesus precious name.

All right. Although Stephen was a man who was selected to resolve a food crisis in the early church, we see that he was a man who was also called to much more than that. Luke describes him here in verse 8 as a man “*full of grace and power.*” We're told that he performed wonders and signs among the people.

Obviously, it's the Lord performing those signs, but He chose to do it through Stephen. And without going into really any other detail about Stephen's ministry, Luke just immediately begins to tell us about this opposition that began to rise up against him.

And it started just simply with some people arguing with him. And he mentioned some of the groups that came against him. He mentions this “*synagogue of the Freedmen.*” These would have been people who had been previously in slavery, but had been freed from slavery. And now that they were Jews, who had been in some bondage. We don't know what. In fact, we don't know that much about the synagogue of the Freedmen, other than that.

We know that there were other men from Cyrene, Alexandria, Asia and then you'll notice I had you take note of Cilicia. And that's an important statement there because it is very possible that the man known to us as, Saul of Tarsus, was among those men from Cilicia because you may know that Tarsus was the capital of the province of Cilicia, in the Roman Empire. And this is right where Paul was from.

We know that he was a very highly educated man. Many of the others were probably educated highly like him, but Luke tells us they were still no match for Stephen. And the reason for that of course, is because he was a man full of the Spirit, and his words were inspired by the Holy Spirit. And so, they couldn't keep up with him, they couldn't match him, they couldn't stand next to the wisdom and knowledge by which he spoke.

And, of course, when that happens, when you're dealing with stubborn and willful people, I don't know if anybody..., but I'm sure none of you know anyone like that because we read about people like that. But when you're dealing with a stubborn and willful person and you best them in terms of whatever is being argued about, they're usually going to resort to some form of evil in order to get their way.

And in this case, what they did is they enlisted men to come forward and claim that Stephen had somehow blasphemed God. And so they start coming up with all these false accusations against Stephen. And Luke tells us they also stirred up the people and stirred up the religious leaders. That probably didn't take a whole lot to do.

And ultimately because of these accusations and accusations are a very powerful way of ruining someone's reputation. It doesn't matter whether it's true or not. We live in a culture today where all you have to do is accuse somebody and that's it, they're done. It doesn't matter if it's true, it doesn't matter if it's an absolute, bold faced lie. You just accuse them in front of the right, incendiary sort of crowd, and that's it, they'll never live it down. And so it's a very, very serious sort of a thing.

Luke tells us that Stephen is eventually hauled in front of the Sanhedrin, which of course is the Jewish ruling council in order that he might give an account of himself. It says they provided false witnesses to speak against him. They made all kinds of claims, untrue as they were, saying things.

And by the way, all the things that says here, in the end here of chapter 6, that they were claiming that Stephen said, all of them have a little shred of truth to them, they all do.

I mean, some of them are just outright lies. But Jesus did talk about the temple. He did prophesy that the temple would be destroyed. He didn't say He would destroy it, and that was one of the accusations. There were other things that have just a shred of truth in them. Stephen did probably talk about the law and he talked about the fact that the law was something..., that we were entering

into a period of grace. And that was something the Jews weren't open and even willing to talk about or hear about and so forth. There's always little bits and pieces, but of course it's misunderstood, and it's blown out of proportion and so there you go.

And then chapter 6 ends with this interesting statement in verse 15 saying, *“And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* And I think that's really interesting in light of the fact that Stephen is being accused of speaking against Moses.

You might say, well, what does that have to do with it? Well, you remember when Moses would come down off the mountain, when he would be spending time with the Lord, his face would glow. And he'd have to put a veil over his face so that the people wouldn't see that glow fading. But literally, from being in the presence of the Lord, his face would glow.

And here, they're accusing Stephen of speaking against Moses. And here's Stephen with that same glowing expression on his face that Moses had, that these men knew Moses had. And so there's some irony here that is going on as Stephen resembles the very man that they're accusing him of blaspheming and speaking against and so on and so on and so on.

And then it starts here in chapter 7 and it says, *“And the high priest said, “Are these things so?””* And of course, that's an open door for Stephen to begin to talk and what happens, or I should say what follows in verse 2 and following here really, for most of the chapter here, is the longest recorded message in the Book of Acts. Nothing is longer.

But before we get into this lengthy speech by Stephen, which we're mostly just going to read through, I want to let you know that along with recounting the history of Israel, I want you to just be listening for this. Because in his speech, Stephen is essentially going to focus on 2 biblical characters and he's going to talk about Moses but before that, he's going to talk about Joseph.

And it's interesting because these are characters that we've been dealing with in our Wednesday night study. Just recently we finished the Book of Genesis, which is largely about Joseph toward the end. And now we're in the Book of Exodus on Wednesday night and we're dealing with Moses. And a lot of what Stephen is going to recount to them is what we've been talking about in Exodus. In fact, just this last week, so a lot of these things are tying together.

But the reason that Stephen is going to talk about Joseph and Moses, is because he's going to be reminding them that both of those men were rejected by their own people initially, but then went on by the grace of God, and the calling of God, to literally become a deliverer of the people of Israel. And even though Stephen isn't going to say that's just like Jesus, the connection is undeniable, and we're going to see that as we get in here.

But as we get through the rest of Stephen's speech, you're going to see that he's going to really turn up the heat toward the end. He's going to verbally accuse Israel's religious leaders of their terrible history of the past and the fact that they crucified the Lord of life. And of course that's, spoiler alert, that's going to cause them to murder him on the spot.

Here we go. He says here, beginning in verse 2, it says, *“And Stephen said:*

“Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.”

Notice that Stephen is reminding them a little bit here that God has a history of doing new things. Right?

He says, *“⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷ ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.*

⁹ “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers,

and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷ “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹ He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²² And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

²³ “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴ And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.”

Now, I'm just going to say what follows here in this next verse is not necessarily included in the text of Exodus, but it's an insight that we get concerning Moses.

It says in verse 25, “He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ ²⁷ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰ “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

³⁵ *“This Moses, whom they rejected, (notice he’s emphasizing that) saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’”*

And what he’s doing here is he’s reminding them that Moses prophesied that God would raise up someone, a prophet, to lead the people of Israel. Now he’s referring to, or Moses was referring to Messiah.

The Jews didn’t readily understand that. Stephen understands it, but he’s reminding them that Moses, this one that they claim to follow, was a man who prophesied that God would raise up someone to speak the Word of the Lord to them.

And he goes on to say, ³⁸ *“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”*

Do you see what Stephen is doing? He’s reminding them of their track record. They’re track record of being a rebellious and stiff-necked people. That’s what he’s doing. All right.

Verse 41. *“And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:*

“‘Did you bring to me slain (by the way, this is from Amos, it’s chapter 5. Did you bring me slain) beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’”

Here Stephen is reminding them that their idol worship culminated, and he’s just reminding them of their own history in the fact that Israel, and then later Judah

were taken captive. First by the nation of Assyria, then by the kingdom of Babylon, and removed from their land. And he's reminding them why those things happen. It was because of their stubborn, willful hearts, and their refusal to submit, and repent of their sin. He's just recounting their history and that is the history of the Jews.

Anyway, he goes on here, verse 44. *“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,”*

And here he's going to quote from Psalm 11.

*⁴⁹ “‘Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’”*

And so now, having done all this, reminding them of their past history, and stubbornness, and so forth, this is where Stephen takes off the kid gloves and he just begins to let him have it.

Verse 51. *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”*

I want you to pause there for just a moment. And he's just laying it out here for them and he's given it to them. And you'll notice that he refers to them as people who are *“uncircumcised in heart and ears.”*

Now circumcision, which is one of the weirdest covenant signs that you can possibly imagine in terms of its true physical form, had a spiritual meaning behind it because circumcision was a cutting away of the flesh. But God only meant that to be a picture of a greater work that He desired to do in people, in their hearts, in their minds, in their ears, and in their eyes. A cutting away of the flesh, a removal of the flesh.

The apostle Paul talks about it in the New Testament. He doesn't necessarily always refer to it as circumcision. He talks about it as, dying to self, which is really the same thing. He talks about it as, placing yourself on the altar of sacrifice, offering yourself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Well, what is that? It's really just the removal of the flesh.

And so circumcision was always meant to be a picture, a symbolic pointer to a greater reality. And that is why he says, you may be circumcised physically. And the Jews referred to themselves that way, they called themselves, the circumcised. They would refer to Gentiles as uncircumcised.

Now to them, that went far beyond just the physical thing. It meant, we are acceptable to God, that's the way they saw it. If they were circumcised, they were acceptable, and because the Gentiles were not, they were unacceptable to God, right?

Now, notice that Stephen is saying, okay, yeah, maybe you adopted this circumcision of the flesh that was passed down to you through your father Abraham, but your hearts are uncircumcised. In other words, the flesh, it just dominates your hearts. And he says, even your ears, you can't hear.

Remember Jesus would say when He was talking, let him who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit is saying. Well, you can't hear if that flesh has not been cut away so he's basically just really laying it out here for them.

Verse 52. He says, *"Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, (he's talking about the Messiah, the Anointed One) whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you (look at this last thing is going to really get them, you) who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."*

Ooooh, those are fighting words right there. To look at these religious leaders who essentially came up with all their rules, which they added on to the Word of God. Jesus was constantly confronting them. In fact, He even told them, you violate the Word of God in favor of you keeping your traditions which you have added to the Word of God. (Mark 7:13)

And so, here Stephen is just coming straight out and saying, you received the law, that wasn't the problem. The problem was, you just never kept it. You couldn't keep it. You did not keep it. Here you go. You got to know, you got to know that Stephen understood the danger of saying what he was saying to these men. But I believe he's speaking by the power and the wisdom of the Holy

Spirit right now. And, I think he has a boldness that just is like, whatever, whatever.

Because we're told here in verse 54, *“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. (your Bible may say, they gnashed their teeth) ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears...”*

And they would do that because they felt that they were hearing blasphemy and they felt like, our ears are too pure to hear blasphemy. All they're hearing is the truth, but they won't hear it.

And it says, *“...and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”*

Now, we know that it was illegal, what they were doing right here is illegal. The Romans, who had conquered Israel, had forbade them from carrying out the death penalty under any circumstances. They were obligated to go through Rome in order to put someone to death. That's why the religious leaders, after trying Jesus, turned Him over to Pilate because that was the way they were supposed to do it. And they could get in a lot of trouble if they violated the laws of Rome. And the Jews knew as much as they were a rebellious people, they still did not want to bring down upon their heads, the wrath of Rome. That was just not a smart thing to do.

But in this particular case, they just didn't care. They were enraged to the point where they, I mean, this turned into mob violence. And we've seen pictures and videos of mob violence. If there's one thing you can tell is that mob violence never stops to ask questions or to consider their ways and that's what's going on here.

And verse 58 ends here by saying, *“And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”* And so we know that Saul was there at this point. And of course, this is the apostle Paul before his conversion.

Verse 59, *“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud*

voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

And of course, that term, "*fell asleep*," is a common biblical euphemism for Christian death. It doesn't mean that he slept. He died. And we know that neither does the soul or the spirit sleep at death. We know from other Scriptures, that when we are absent from the body, we are present with the Lord.

And Jesus even told the story of a rich man and a diseased beggar who both died. And we knew in that..., by the way, that wasn't a parable. He was telling about an actual event. And the diseased beggar, when he died in faith, was taken immediately by the angels to where he went. We have these interesting elements to the end of this chapter.

But Stephen's example is one that we need to touch on for just a moment because I'm sure you noticed before he died, he uttered 2 statements that were really the same as ones that Jesus made on the cross, albeit in reverse order.

Jesus dismissed His Spirit at the end and prayed for forgiveness for those who were killing Him prior to that. Stephen did it in a slightly different order, but he did it. And Stephen then is the first Christian martyr that we have in the Bible. Right?

Someone who had come to faith in Christ, but who was killed for their faith. He's the first one. By the way, our word, martyr is a transliteration of the Greek word for, witness. Transliteration means you take the Greek letters and you just convert them to English letters, and you get the word, martyr. And again, that's the Greek word for witness.

And other than the crucifixion of Jesus, Stephen's death is the only scene of martyrdom that is described in this kind of detail. I mean, we know of other people that were killed, but it's given in a much more reader's digest, condensed version, kind of a fashion.

Despite the fact that death by stoning was, I have to believe, a very painful and very troubling way to die. We don't see Stephen cursing. That was a common thing when people were being put to death, executed, by whatever means. They would cry out, curse, scream, yell at those who were putting them to death. But we don't see him cursing the brutality and the deception and the lies of those that had put him in this position. What we see him doing is praying for them and asking for their pardon.

That's not a work of the flesh. That is a work of the Spirit inside of someone. To literally be falling to their knees for the last time physically and to be calling out for the Lord to pardon those who were killing him, that's just amazing.

But I look at this and I think to myself, God has to be giving special grace at this moment. Don't you think? In death? For Steven to do that. To just, to be able to do all that he did, to be able to speak to the Sanhedrin in the terms that he used to speak to them. To say the things that he did, knowing the danger that existed. And then to be stoned, and as he was being stoned, to cry out to God for their pardon and so forth. It just it leads me to the conclusion that God gives special grace just at that moment.

We talked earlier when we were reading a passage where the apostles were thrown into jail because they were preaching the gospel. And we read here earlier in the Book of Acts how an angel appeared during the night and let them out.

And we were talking about how cool that is to read that kind of stuff. And we love those sorts of stories. We love talking about miraculous deliverance. We love even from the Old Testament, the story of Daniel and the lion's den. How cool is that? And, the lions are just sitting there, just chill with him in the den until they pulled him out and threw the other guys who falsely accused him in, and the lions ripped them to shreds. It wasn't an issue with the lions just being full or something like that. It was a supernatural deliverance.

We love the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego thrown into the fiery furnace, walking with the angel of the Lord, and then coming out of that. For the men who threw him in died of the heat but they came walking out of the fire. Didn't even smell like smoke nothing on their body was even burned except the ropes that had tied their hands and feet. We love that kind of stuff. It's wonderful.

But we also have to deal with men like Stephen, and we're going to come up here in chapter 12, I think it is, and we're going to have to deal with the death of James, the apostle, the brother of John. He's going to get his head cut off, and it's going to be just quick. We're not going to hear very much about it at all. It's just, boom, it just happens.

And while we may be left wondering why, I think it's important to ask yourself. What is your view on suffering? What is your view on suffering? The reason I think that's an important question to ask, well, I think we all know. We're living in a world today that is becoming increasingly hostile toward our Christian faith

and toward our Savior. And although we may not be experiencing a great deal of it here in eastern Oregon and western Idaho. We know that it's heating up. We know the world is heating up, and we know that we were told that it was going to heat up. We don't usually think of the apostle Paul as someone who operated in the prophetic, but he did from time to time.

And there was one such statement that he made that was very prophetic in his second letter to Timothy where he basically he foretold the very day that we are living in right here, right now, and it's in 2 Timothy 3. Let's put it on the screen for you. He writes to Timothy and says,

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (ESV)

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, (and that's what's going to be behind a lot of it right there, and they will also be) lovers of money, (they will be) proud (people), arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, (people will be) heartless, (he says, in the last days) unappeasable, (they will easily give in to slandering others) slanderous, (they will be) without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (they will) having the appearance of godliness, (maybe on the outside) but (they will entirely) denying its power. (and Paul says that we as believers are to) Avoid such people. (sometimes it's not possible, he exhorts us to, avoid such people.)

Stephen was unable to avoid them. He ran smack into them. Well, the fact of the matter is, things have gotten worse since the days of Stephen. And we're living, here it is up on the screen, 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verses 1 through 5. This is a commentary on the world that you live in right now. So you better start getting used to the idea of what it means to suffer. And you better think it through. And I would encourage you to think it through before it happens. Because when you're in the midst of it, that's not the time to start thinking about how I feel about this. Because you're going to be filled with a lot of other emotions.

And so, after painting a rather difficult picture here, as Paul does in his letter to Timothy, he goes on to make this somewhat uncommon promise from the same letter. He says,

2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

...all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

...all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

In other words, after describing the environment of the last days, he says, but obviously there's going to be believers living in that environment that I just described to you. Now, anybody who wants to live a godly life during that time period, here's the promise. You want to put this up on the fridge? They will be persecuted. They will be persecuted.

Now what's interesting about that is you'll notice he says, all who desire to live a godly life. And what we deduce from that statement is that it is possible probably to avoid persecution. Even in an environment like the one we're living in right now, if you want to avoid getting persecuted, I mean, I can understand why you would want to.

Who wants to be persecuted? Who wants to lose their job? Who wants to get beaten up? Who wants to lose their life? Like Stephen did. Where do I sign up, right? No, I think not, so what do you need to do to avoid that? Oh, it's easy. Just blend in. Just blend in. You know how the world acts? Just act like them. You know how the world talks? Just talk like them. That's it. It's really not a tough situation. Just lay low as it relates to godly living. Just lay low, you'll be fine. You'll skate right through. Nobody will bother you.

It's the people who stand up and say, no, I don't care, I'm going to live for Jesus. I'm going to live for Jesus, and I don't care. And those are the people who refuse to blend in. And for those people, the scripture has some very interesting things to say. Let me show you this from 1 Peter.

1 Peter 2:19,21 (NIV1984)

...it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

...it is commendable (I'm quoting this out of the NIV because I like it) if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. (look at these words) To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Hey, check that out, *"To this you were called."* Pastor Paul, I just don't know what my calling is. Well, among other things, it's to suffer, does that thrill you? I was hoping for something that would include a microphone and a spotlight. Sorry.

But you know what? It's a calling. It's a calling. It's our calling to follow in his example. But let me share something with you, and this is very cool, wherever there's a calling, there's a blessing. Let me show you this from 1 Peter chapter 4.

1 Peter 4:12-14 (ESV)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (I mean, good grief. Jesus told you this was going to happen) But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, (woohoo!) you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

There's a blessing where there is a calling that is being walked out, right? And then check out this statement from 4:19.

1 Peter 4:19 (ESV)

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

And in case you ever wondered whether suffering was possible, part of God's will or not, this one should take care of that forever because Peter tells us that

there are times when suffering is for Christ is a part of God's will for our lives. Right? And finally, this statement by the apostle Paul, I love this from Philippians. He says,

Philippians 3:10-22 (NIV84)

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (we all go about that far, but then we slow down a little bit on the last part of this where he says) and (you know what, I want to know) the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, (in fact, I want to) becoming like him in his death...

Wow. I got to tell you that passage blows me away. It really does. Paul longed for such a close union to His Lord. He said, I don't just want to know Him in the good. I want to know Him in suffering. I want to know Him in the midst of suffering.

By the way, Paul got his wish, many times. But for those of you who worry about suffering and might even at times be tempted to blend in, and you struggle with the idea, of could I endure it? Could I endure that kind of suffering?

I'm going close here this morning with the memories of childhood from Corrie Ten Boom, who did end up suffering, by the way, when she and her sister were taken captive during World War II for harboring Jews. And she said,

When I was a little girl, I went to my father and said, "Daddy, I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ." "Tell me," said Father, "When you take a train trip to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the ticket? Three weeks before?" "No, Daddy, you give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train." "That is right," my father said, "and so it is with God's strength. Our wise Father in heaven knows when you will need things too. Today you do not need the strength to be a martyr. But as soon as you are called upon for the honor of facing death for Jesus, He will supply the strength you need—just in time." — **Corrie ten Boom**

When I was a little girl, I went to my father and said, "Daddy, I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ." "Tell me," said Father, "When you take a train trip to Amsterdam, when do I give you the

money for the ticket? Three weeks before?” “No, Daddy, you give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train.” “That is right,” my father said, “and so it is with God’s strength. Our wise Father in heaven knows when you will need things too. Today you do not need the strength to be a martyr. But as soon as you are called upon for the honor of facing death for Jesus, He will supply the strength you need—just in time.”

So don't worry. God knows and He'll give you the strength when you need it. So don't worry about things ahead of time. What did Jesus say? Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself, right? (Matthew 6:34) Amen. Let's stand together.

If you need prayer this morning, we would invite you to come up after the service and let us pray with you. We'll have some folks available to do that.

Father, God, we open our hearts to You to this message, and it's not necessarily a fun message. Particularly living in the world that we are and seeing in it, the prophetic fulfillment of what the apostle Paul said would take place in the last days.

And Lord, here we are. We're living in it and it's our life. It's our world, and people of the world are becoming increasingly hostile to the things that we declare to be true and the one whom we lift up as Savior and Lord.

And so Lord we just pray that You would minister all of these things to our heart and prepare and equip each one of us for whatever Your calling is on our lives.

And I especially pray for the young people in this room because, they're going to outlive most of us, and they're going to deal with things even that we don't deal with, and they will need special grace. And I know that You'll give it because where there is a calling, there is a blessing. And I thank you for that.

Lord, You are faithful and You have all things in control. And we thank You for that. And we praise You for who You are.

And we also praise You and thank You, Lord, that You've told us that You're coming back for us.

And the Spirit and the bride say, come. Let Him who hears say, come, even so come Lord Jesus, in your name we pray.

And all God's people said, amen.

God bless you. Have a good rest of your Sunday.