

# ***Biblical Courage in a Frightening World: Stephen***

*By Pastor Tom Parrish, Hope Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN*

## ***Acts 7:51-60***

***Courage is testifying to the truth when you  
know it means the end.***

*51 “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

### ***The Stoning of Stephen***

*54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 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 rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 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.*

Many times our final words tell a lot about what we lived for.  
Stephens's final words are incredible.

*““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.”*

Compare Stephen's final words with these final words:

I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.  
~~ Humphrey Bogart, actor, d. January 14, 1957

I'm bored with it all.  
*Before slipping into a coma. He died 9 days later.*  
~~ Winston Churchill, statesman, d. January 24, 1965

Damn it . . . Don't you dare ask God to help me.  
*To her housekeeper, who had begun to pray aloud.*  
~~ Joan Crawford, actress, d. May 10, 1977

Nothing matters. Nothing matters.  
~~ Louis B. Mayer, film producer, d. October 29, 1957

Last words:

"Our God is the God from whom cometh salvation: God is the Lord by whom we escape death." Martin Luther

"Live in Jesus, live in Jesus, and the flesh need not fear death." John Knox

"The best of all is, God is with us. Farewell! Farewell!" John Wesley

**"I shall be satisfied with Thy likeness--satisfied, satisfied!" Charles Wesley**

What will your final words be? Remember, those words will reflect how you lived and what you lived for.

Stephen lived 100% for Jesus, was not afraid to speak the truth and in speaking the truth was stoned to death.

Stephen, you may remember, was chosen to be the head of the deacons.

He was a very good man and the Bible also says that he was full of both the Holy Spirit and love.

The early Christian community chose him to take care of the money.

This money was to be used to take care of the widows, orphans and poor people.

**Stephen however soon got into trouble**

A group of Jews were very jealous of Stephen and they plotted and instigated to have Stephen killed.

They made false accusations against Stephen and they brought him to a trial in a Jewish court.

Stephen finally stood up and made a long speech in his own defense and that speech goes on and on in chapter six.

His speech is so long that it takes more than two pages in our Bible to hear the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and the other Old Testament heroes. Stephen recited a history of Jewish people being disobedient to God.

All of a sudden, in verse fifty-one of chapter seven, it all changes.

All of a sudden this long, disarming speech gets nasty and Stephen says:

***“You stiff necked, inflexible people.***

***“You people are hard hearted and your hearts are not soft to God.***

***You people have wax in your ears and you don’t hear the words of God.***

***You people, your fathers persecuted the prophets, and now you betrayed and killed the Messiah.***

***You people, you are the ones who killed Jesus.”***

It is an understatement to say that Stephen’s bluntness made everybody mad when he said, “You people.”

He had said,      You Jesus killers.

                          You prophet killers.

                          You worship your religious traditions and interpretations more than God.”

Well, to make a very long story short, these Jewish leaders took Stephen outside and threw him into a pit and started to throw stones at him.

This was the normal way the Jews executed people: throw that person into a pit and throw rocks until that person was dead.

As Stephen was dying, he moaned the words which have been remembered for two thousand years:

***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”***

These were the same words that Jesus spoke from the cross when Jesus gave that powerful sermon from the cross and forgave his executors.

Instead of hatred for his killers, Stephen was like Jesus and prayed for their forgiveness.

Another rock was thrown and then another and soon Stephen's body was silent and lifeless and Stephen became the first martyr of the church.

Notice: Luke says that Stephen "fell asleep." In fact he was DEAD but in the presence of Jesus death is merely a night of sleep.

**Today, I would like to make a few observations about believers like Stephen.**

Stephen died because of his love and faithfulness to Jesus.

Unfortunately today, martyrs are getting bad press these days because the Muslim terrorists that bombed the Twin Towers and claim to be martyrs for their faith.

There is an enormous difference between a Muslim terrorist and a Christian martyr.

**Christian Martyrs die for the truth of Jesus Christ without taking the lives of others.**

**Islamic martyrs die killing their enemies so that they have assurance of paradise.**

**There are many contrasts between Christian and Muslim faiths that produce believers who die for their faith.**

**I am weary of the David Letterman's Rosie O'Donalds, Oprah Winfrey's and Sam Donaldson's of the media who say that there is no real difference between Christians and Muslims.**

**Think about it:**

**Mohammed was the prophet of war; Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6-7).**

**Mohammed's disciples killed for the faith; Jesus' disciples were killed for their faith (Acts 12:2; 2 Tim. 4:7).**

**Mohammed promoted persecution against the "infidels"; Jesus forgave and converted the chief persecutor Paul (1 Tim. 1:13-15).**

**Mohammed was the taker of life; Jesus is the giver of life (John 10:27-28).**

**Mohammed and his fellow warriors murdered thousands; Jesus murdered none but gave his life for many (compare John 12:48).**

**Mohammed's method was COMPULSION; Jesus' aim was voluntary CONVERSION (Acts 3:19).**

**Mohammed practiced FORCE; Jesus preached FAITH (John 6:29,35).**

**Mohammed was a WARRIOR; Jesus is a DELIVERER (Col. 1:13; 1 Thess.1:10).**

Martyrdom for believers has always been part of our Christian heritage.

The cradle of Jesus is always connected to the cross of Jesus.

Jesus has given us rebirth so that we are prepared to die that others might live.

**Consider A few things about believers like Stephen:**

**First Characteristic of believes like Stephen. They can not keep**

**their faith private.**

So Stephen had this problem, as did all martyrs, of not keeping their mouth shut and keeping silent about their Christian convictions.

There is a story about a **famous martyr** in the ancient Christian faith.

His name was **Ignatius** who was killed by the Emperor Hadrian in the year 107 AD

The Emperor Hadrian insisted that Ignatius bow and pray to his gods who he believed helped him win a battle for Rome.

Ignatius refused and instead opened his mouth and defied Hadrian.

Ignatius spoke: ***“What you call gods are no better than devils. There is only one God, the true God who created heaven and earth and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”***

As all good prophets do, Ignatius didn't keep his mouth shut and was killed for publicly speaking the truth about Jesus.

The same theme continues in our world today.

You don't get in trouble for being silent; you get in trouble when you speak the truth publicly.

**Russia:** The good Lutherans living up in northern Russian kept their mouths shut and got along with the Soviet dictators for 70 years.

The Russian Orthodox Church burned their incense and lit their candles and wore their golden chasubles, kept their mouths shut about the Soviet dictators, and the Soviet government left them alone.

But not the Jehovah Witnesses and the Baptists in the Soviet Empire.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baptists refused to register their churches with the government and were outspoken critics of the Soviet Union.

When you speak out against the government, you awaken that government's anger and power and punishment.

So what lesson do we learn? Play it safe. Keep your mouth shut and you will never be a martyr.

**South Africa**, especially in the early days of people rising up against the racist policies of apartheid.

Steve Bilko was a young Christian and a medical student who was very critical of the South African government and its position on apartheid and separation.

He wrote the book, "I SAY WHAT I LIKE."

When you say what you like to a hostile and powerful government, you get killed and Bilko got killed.

He was another martyr in the long history of martyrs in the Christian faith.

### **El Salvador - Bishop Romero**

He could have been a nice, plain, Roman Catholic Bishop and kept his silent about atrocities committed by the ruling military junta.

If he would have had any brains, he just would have a church mouse and nobody would have bothered him at all.

But he would get in the pulpit and criticize the government and how it was out of tune with Jesus in front of everyone in the church.

One Sunday morning, when the Cathedral was full and he was celebrating the Mass, a shot rang out and splattered the body and blood of the

Archbishop so his body and blood joined the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ on the altar.

So the first characteristic about believers like Stephen from centuries past and today is that they opened their mouths and speak the truth about Jesus and the sin that surrounded them.

**The second characteristic of people like Stephen is that they are willing to switch from the third person to the second person in their language.**

They switched from saying “they” to say “you.”

In Acts six, Stephen’s speech is really boring and it goes on and on and on about Jewish history and their heroes of history until chapter seven, verse fifty one and he changes suddenly and says, “YOU!”

*You* stiff necked people.

*You* hard hearted people.

*You* people with wax in your ears.

*You* people who betrayed Jesus.

*You* people who killed Jesus.

*You* people who worship your religious traditions.

*You* Jesus killers. *You.*”

The word, “you,” is a very powerful word and it changes everything.

**Do you remember the story of King David, Bathsheba, and Nathan?**

King David was up on his balcony and looked down at the neighboring veranda and saw a gorgeous woman there.

He lusted after Bathsheba passionately.

He arranged for her to come to him and he made love with her.

Bathsheba got pregnant.

So what did King David do?



He arranged for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, a military man, to front lines of the attack. He got killed. Surprise, surprise! Problem solved!

But the prophet Nathan saw through King David's schemes.

The prophet Nathan came to King and he sent into the front of the battle so Uriah would be killed on the David and told the king a parable about a rich man stealing a poor man's sheep.

King David, former shepherd said, "The rich man should be killed."

And Nathan said to the King: **YOU ARE THE MAN.**

Wow. What an indictment against the king. You is very personal

Nathan had the guts to use the word, "You." He spoke the word, "you," directly into King David's face. He should have died.

That's what all prophets do.

They have the guts to move from the safety of the third person, they, to the second person, you.

They point their fingers and say, "You...are the guilty one."

In our politically correct age we have cleaned up our language:

We don't point fingers and say "you" are the one.

We don't call people "liars" they are "disingenuous."

Believers like Stephen called it for what it was!!!!

**A third characteristic of a martyr is that they are willing to die. They don't want to die, but they are willing to die for Jesus that others might live in the truth, with justice and freedom.**

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** didn't want to die, but he decided that Hitler was an vicious cruel man who plotted to conquer the whole world and force his dictatorial Aryan policies around the globe.

Hitler needed to be stopped. Bonhoeffer, a Christian Pastor, arranged for Hitler's assassination.

Bonhoeffer was discovered and martyred.

He was willing to die to protect others for Jesus.

The same was true of **Sir Thomas More**.

Do you remember the story of **King Henry the VIII** who wanted to get rid of his wife and marry another?

As I recall, Martin Luther did not really condemn the English king for his infidelity, but Sir Thomas More did.

There is a fabulous and famous play entitled, A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS, in which Sir Thomas More directly and publicly confronts King Henry the VIII for his marital infidelity and his government corruption.

Sir Thomas More was killed for that.

Christian martyrs believe totally in Jesus Christ..

These martyrs believe so deeply that they are willing to die for their faith

in Jesus and their consequent moral values.

These martyrs don't hide behind the safety of silence; they move from the safe "they" to the personal "you;" and they speak God's Word when and where it is not safe to speak these Words:

What about today? Where are the prophets?

We desperately need men and women who will stand on the capital steps and declare:

Amy Klobushar, Al Franken, President Obama, you are killing the unborn and Jesus will judge you.

Bishop Mark Hanson of the ELCA, you are misleading God's people about the truth and you will be judged and have to give an account.

Joel Ostein, you are dramatically preaching a gospel that is not the biblical gospel and confusing the truth, repent or you will be judged.

**Permit me to close with these words:**

In 1861 at the beginning of the Civil war a Christian woman who believed in abolition, **Julia W. Howe**, wrote a hymn.

Howe visited a Union Army camp on the Potomac River near Washington, D. C. She heard the soldiers singing the song "John Brown's Body," and was taken with the strong marching beat. She wrote the words the next day:

I awoke in the grey of the morning, and as I lay waiting for dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to entwine themselves in my mind, and I said to myself, "I must get up and write these verses, lest I fall asleep and forget them!" So I sprang out of bed and in the dimness found an old stump of a pen, which I remembered using the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper.

The hymn appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1862. It was sung at the funerals of British statesman Winston Churchill, American senator Robert Kennedy, and American presidents Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon.

Here are those words:

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**Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on.**

**Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.**

**I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps  
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on.**

**Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His day is marching on.**

**I have read a fiery Gospel writ in burnished rows of steel;  
“As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal”;  
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,  
Since God is marching on.**

**Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Since God is marching on.**

**He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat;  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet;  
Our God is marching on.**

**Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Our God is marching on.**

**In the beauty of the lilies Jesus was born across the sea,  
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:  
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free;  
While God is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! While God is marching on.**

**He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,  
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is honor to the brave;  
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of wrong His slave,  
Our God is marching on.  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Our God is marching on.**

Every generation of believers needs to make a monumental choice.

Will we stand for and with Jesus OR will we play it safe and be silent.

This choice is never easy. It is the hardest choice you will ever make because it is the most important decision you will ever make.

I invite you to choose this evening. Choose to stand with Jesus and refuse to be silent.

Yellow Cards Response:

\_\_\_\_\_ This week I will read the entire story of Stephen from Acts Chapters 6 & 7.

\_\_\_\_\_ This week I will purchase and read a copy of “***The Complete Infidel’s Guide to the Koran***” by Robert Spencer. Amazon.com, Barnes & Nobel

\_\_\_\_\_ I will sign up for the ***International Christians Concerned*** Newsletter at <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/index.php>