

Heaven's Standing Applause

Opening Text: Acts 6:8-12, 7:1, 54-60, 8:1

V. 8 - *And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.*

Introduction: Stephen was originally chosen to be a deacon (literally, a *distributer*). His primary job in the early church was to serve at the tables, to distribute food. However, we see here that he distributed more than food. God used him in the miraculous! There are no civilians in the fight of faith, only soldiers. Every believer can be used in the miraculous.

In **verse 12** we see that he ended up being arrested because of his faith and taken to the Jewish Council. This was the supreme theocratic court of the Jews, made up of 71 members of the religious elite of the day. This was a very prestigious court having been founded some 200 years BC. Any decision from this court had no appeal. It was final.

Stephen was on trial for blasphemy and there was only one possible penalty for that kind of crime: death by stoning. Stephen knew well that despite having been granted the opportunity to speak, he was not going to make it out of that place alive. The following moments were going to be his last. What was he going to do with that one last opportunity?

What I admire the most about Stephen was that,

- With one last message to preach, he preached the gospel,
- With one last breath to breathe, he told them about Jesus and the glory of God,
- With one last prayer to pray, he knelt and prayed for his enemies!

Whatever he did in that last moment of his life, he did it for Jesus and for others.

The great preacher Lester Sumrall wrote a great book entitled "the Militant Church", and he said that one of the hindrances to become a militant church is self-centredness:

"It is easy you know, to let all your attention go inside yourself, good or bad. 'I am this, I am that, and I am here, I am there. I am sad, and I am rejected. I am angry, or I am happy.' We do not have to be self-centred; we need to be God-centred. That will cause your focus to be on the needs of others, on letting the love and mercy of the Lord flow out of us to the hurt, wounded and hungry ones of this world"

In El Salvador (Central America) there is a church of 115 000 members. Every member of the church has to memorise the following purpose statement:

"I have a purpose; I am not just bumping through life with no direction or reason for existence. My purpose is winning souls. This is the ultimate and highest calling on the earth. I fulfill my purpose best in a group. I maximise my potential better in partnership. I will never be satisfied until I fulfill my purpose. I have no promise of

tomorrow. I must work while I have the chance because I don't know how long I have left to reach the lost.

What would you do if you had one last message to preach, one last breath to breathe and one last prayer to pray?

The way Stephen used his last opportunity reveal 4 facts about him:

1. Stephen believed the message he preached

He did not change the message to fit the circumstances and gain the acceptance of the Council:

- He preached it accurately, in great detail and order
- He preached it convincingly (V.10 - *they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit which he spoke*)
- He preached it without apology (v.51)

Stephen did not dilute the message; he didn't pollute it either. Stephen believed the message he preached. The message of the gospel is still our message, and it still is the power of God unto salvation.

2. Stephen believed in praying for the unsaved

7:60 - *Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin"*

His last prayer was for the unsaved. He didn't just say those last words to sound pious, or noble, or spiritual; or simply because he wanted to sound a bit like Jesus on the cross. No he did it on purpose. He interceded for people who were lost.

3. Steven believed in the grace of God

Stephen prayed basically for people committing murder. He must have believed in the grace of God and how God's grace can be extended even to the worst of sinners.

Paul wrote a lot about grace. He must have remembered how God forgave him for being an accomplice in the death of Stephen, and how God turned him from Saul to Paul!

1 Timothy 1:12-16 - *¹²And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, ¹³although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.*

Ephesians 3:7-8 - *7 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. 8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ*

1 Corinthians 15:9-10 - *For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

4. Stephen believed in the power of God to change lives

This is an angry mob of extremely zealous and fanatic religious people. Could God change such people? Yes! He can certainly change Sauls into Pauls!

Stephen was a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. He believed in the power of God to change people. He didn't just pray to sound pious, he prayed because He believed in God's ability to turn the worst of sinners into the most radical saints!

Conclusion

Acts 7:55-56 The Passion Translation - *But Stephen, overtaken with great faith, was full of the Holy Spirit. He fixed his gaze into the heavenly realm and saw the glory and splendor of God—and Jesus, who stood up at the right hand of God. “Look!” Stephen said. “I can see the heavens opening and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God to welcome me home!”*

What a vision! At the end of this story, we see heaven's standing applause for a faithful soldier.

In the NT there are 10 references about Jesus sitting on the throne. Here, Jesus is standing. He is standing up from His throne to receive someone who also stood up for Him – a man who was not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus. He is standing to sheer and welcome a faithful soldier home.

Stephen had one last opportunity and he used it well. Jesus was well pleased with him.

- We should live for the applause of Jesus – If we are not ashamed of Him before men, He will not be ashamed of us before the angels and the Father in Heaven.
- We should live with urgency and knowing that today may be all we have

James 4:13-15 - *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; 14 whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.*

Let us use every day God gives us, to pray the unsaved into the Kingdom and help them come in, by sharing Jesus with them.

Food for thought

Tim La Haye wrote, *“The greatest and most effective way the Gospel will be taken to this world is by one-on-one evangelism. To illustrate the urgency of the matter, consider that there are 138,000 more lost people in the world today than there were yesterday. If all the lost people in the world were lined up 30 inches apart, they would encircle the globe, not one time, not two times, not three times, but thirty times. The line is growing at a rate of twenty miles per day”*

Dr. James Kennedy wrote, *if a gifted evangelist with an international reputation could win 1000 person to Christ every night of the year, it would take him over 10 000 years to win the entire world for Christ, ignoring the population explosion. However, if a true disciple of Christ were able, under God, to win just 1 person each year, it would take only 32 years to win the entire world for Christ. Obviously we are taught in the scriptures that the entire world will never be won to Christ, but the point is still made”*