

Something Worth Dying for

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[0 : 00] Perhaps it's best summed up by a poster that was once seen in a university halls of residence, and it was put there by the Apathy Society. The poster said, simply, the Apathy Society will not meet this week, it can't be bothered.

So these days, there are basically very few causes that people feel strongly about. But what we see here in Acts chapter 6 and chapter 7 is a man who actually has something that is worth dying for. Stephen, one of the early Christian believers, was prepared to live and to die for the cause of Jesus Christ. Stephen, in fact, is regarded as the first Christian martyr.

And so the question for us is, would you say that you are living for something that's worth dying for? In other words, when you make an honest assessment of your life, what is it that motivates you? What is it that you're living for? What gives you reason for getting out of bed in the morning? What drives your life? Because this text here in Acts 6 and 7 really is a challenge for us all, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not.

[1 : 25] In a sense, it forces us to consider whether what we are living for and how we live our life, is it worth dying for?

Is the cause that we're involved in, that we live for, worth dying for? Because it was for Stephen. And so we've got three points this afternoon to look at. First of all, we see a courageous man. Second, we see a challenging message. And third, we see a costly mission. So first of all, a courageous man. Stephen was introduced earlier when he was chosen for a role in the church. Acts 6, verse 5. He's described as being full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And Luke now says, chapter 6, verse 8.

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. But then opposition arose and we're told, verse 10, So the Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to be this powerful witness to Jesus Christ.

[2 : 40] And while Stephen was appointed as a deacon earlier in Acts chapter 6, what we see here is that Stephen is also an evangelist. And that's what got Stephen into trouble.

A group of religious people didn't like what Stephen was saying. And so what did they do? Well, they set up false witnesses to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. Look at verse 11.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

Know the order there and what they say. Moses comes first and then God. But this accusation meant that Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin, the big Jewish ruling council.

And then verse 13, 14. They produced false witnesses who testified this fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

[3 : 41] For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us. So what's Stephen on trial for?

Well, for speaking against Moses and his customs and for speaking against God and his holy place. In other words, they accuse Stephen of opposing the law and the temple.

That's God's holy place. And the law and the temple, of course, are absolutely central to Judaism. But Stephen's opponents misunderstand that, in fact, the law and the temple are pointing to Jesus Christ.

So Jesus came to fulfill the law and Jesus came to replace the temple. Because we can't get to God by keeping the law.

God accepts us through Jesus Christ who kept the law for us. And we don't need a temple to meet with God. God welcomes us into a relationship with himself through Jesus Christ.

[4 : 51] But what Stephen says here sets alarm bells ringing in the religious establishment. And that's why they accuse him of blasphemy. And there could not be a more serious charge.

And yet it doesn't scare Stephen because look at how he's described in verse 15. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Now, perhaps this was God's way of showing his opponents that Stephen wasn't speaking blasphemous words. But instead, Stephen was speaking God's message.

And so the Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to be a calm and courageous witness for Jesus. Now, before we move on to see what Stephen said, we should remember that it's the same Holy Spirit that enables people today, people like us, the church, to be calm and courageous witnesses for Jesus.

Whether it's at school or at university, at work, with neighbors, with friends. It doesn't matter who we are and it doesn't matter what we do. Because if we're a believer in Jesus, then we are automatically a witness for Jesus.

[6 : 11] Just like Stephen was. Remember, Stephen's responsibility in the church was basically to distribute the food. But I didn't mean that Stephen was stuck in the kitchen and that was all he had to do.

No, Stephen had opportunities to speak about Jesus. And so wherever God has placed us in this world, that's where we are to be a witness to Jesus Christ.

And we might face opposition for it, but God enabled Stephen to be a courageous witness to the extent that he was put on trial for his faith. And so it's both a challenge to us not to shrink back when it comes to our witness to Jesus.

But it's also an encouragement to us too, because God will help us to be courageous when it's needed. And so that's the first thing, a courageous man.

The second point is a challenging message. Because Stephen's given the opportunity to defend himself against these charges. Stephen takes on the role of prosecutor.

[7 : 27] And this is the longest speech, as I said, in Acts. But it's not exactly what you'd call a seeker-sensitive sermon. Because Stephen essentially does here, what he does is he gives a history of God's people to make a powerful point.

He criticizes his opponents for their consistent rejection of God's messengers, which culminates in their rejection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

And so Stephen essentially summarizes the Old Testament, and he selects significant people along the way to drive home his point.

And so if you look down, you see that his history lesson begins with Abraham, verse 1 to 8. Then on to Joseph, verse 9 to 16. Then on to Moses, verse 17 to 44.

And then Joshua and David and Solomon, verse 45 to 50. And then what Stephen does is he applies thousands of years of history simply to accuse his opponents of rejecting Jesus Christ.

[8 : 40] Verse 51 to 53. And so his argument, though it seems very long and it seems very complex, is really quite simple. He makes two simple points.

He makes a point about God's presence with his people, which is related to the temple. And secondly, he makes a point about God's people's rejection of him.

So first of all, God's presence with his people. And then secondly, God's people's rejection of him. So God's presence with his people. Remember, Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple.

And so he shows how God's presence was never limited to the temple. And it was never limited to the land of Israel.

Because God is a living God, God is never confined to a place. He is never confined to a building. And so Stephen starts with Abraham to show how God was always with his people.

[9 : 44] And in our reading, we see, well, where did God meet Abraham? In Mesopotamia, which was a pagan land. It wasn't Israel. What about Joseph?

Well, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. If you've seen Joseph in the amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, you know the story. But we read, verse 9, God was with him.

And where did God meet Moses? In the desert wilderness of Sinai. And so in all of his dealings with his people, God was never tied to a specific geographical location.

Like, you need to go to that place if you want to meet with God. Because no human building can contain the God of heaven. And so even when we get to the tabernacle in verse 44, it was in the desert and it moved around.

And then when Solomon built the temple, a house for God in verse 47, it was never intended to confine God to a place or even a people.

[10:51] And that's why Stephen quotes from the prophet Isaiah in verse 48 to 50. Because God's presence is with his people. Not place, but people.

And so Stephen's emphasizing that God can't be localized to a building. He wasn't confined to Israel. He couldn't be put in a box as if he could be controlled.

And so Stephen, of course, had been accused of speaking against the temple by saying that Jesus would destroy it. But what is the point of the temple? Not to have a nice building, but to have a relationship with God.

And so with the coming of Jesus, it's the end of the temple. Because a relationship with God happens through Jesus.

And so rather than speaking against the temple, what Stephen accuses his listeners of doing is idolizing the temple. Where the temple itself, rather than God, had become their object of worship.

[12:01] So much so that when Jesus came, the fulfillment of the temple, they rejected Jesus. And so before we move on, there's a warning here about idolizing places.

Because church buildings can easily be idolized, can't they? People can become so obsessed with a place that they forget what that place exists for.

And so you can tell when a building has become an idol. For example, when somebody suggests leaving the building and going somewhere else to worship. Or even if somebody suggests changing something in the building.

And the people who use the building just can't cope with the very suggestion. Then it's obvious that the building has become an idol. More important than what it's supposed to point to.

And idolizing buildings is probably obvious. But what's maybe less obvious is idolizing a particular church or brand or network. Like when people just can't see past a certain church.

[13:15] And think that you've got to go there if you are to be sound. Because that's the place with the right theology. And that's the place with the right practice. And so everywhere else doesn't quite cut it.

And so the building or the church or the brand, whilst a good thing, can become an idol if it becomes the ultimate thing. Because it takes the focus away from the one it should ultimately point to.

And so what Stephen's saying here is the temple was not an end in itself. It pointed to the presence of God with his people that would come fully in Jesus Christ.

And so he speaks of God's presence with his people. But secondly, he speaks about God's people's rejection of him. That's the other point that Stephen is driving home here.

God's people in the past rejected God's messengers. Now God's son appears and they reject him too. And so he uses examples, verse 9 and 10.

[14:24] Then Joseph was rejected even though he was God's man. Verse 35. Moses was also rejected even though he was God's man.

So God sent Moses and the people worshipped a golden calf instead. Verse 39 to 41. And so what Stephen is doing is he's building up an argument to show how this pattern of rejection of God's people of old culminates in the rejection of God's son, Jesus, the Messiah.

So look at verse 51. What Stephen says as he concludes his speech. You stiff-necked people, your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised.

You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. That's a brutal conclusion to his speech, isn't it? But he's driving home the fact that Israel has rejected the Messiah, Jesus.

They were too proud to accept that Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for. And so they showed the same stubborn resistance to God that their forefathers did.

[15:43] Stephen's argument basically is saying, like fathers, like sons. You're just as stubborn, just as resistant, just as rebellious, just as idolatrous, as your forefathers, as your ancestors.

And so whilst he says, he mentions the word uncircumcised, their bodies had the outward mark of circumcision. Stephen's saying that they're uncircumcised in their hearts and they resist the Holy Spirit.

So they might have looked religious. They might have called themselves the people of God. They might have sounded religious. They may have had the marks of religion outwardly on their bodies. But on the inside, in their hearts, Stephen says, you don't believe. In the past, you killed God's prophets. And now you've killed Jesus.

And that's the point of his speech. Look at verse 52. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one.

[16:53] And now you have betrayed and murdered him. Who's the righteous one? It's Jesus. And killing Jesus proved that they were in opposition to God's purposes and to God's son.

Rejecting God's messengers in the past and now rejecting God's Messiah in the present. So see how Stephen is a brilliant prosecutor.

Because he stacks up the evidence against them and it's incontrovertible. Verse 53. You who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.

So they accused Stephen of blaspheming against Moses and God, remember, and of speaking against the law and against the temple. But in reality, what does Stephen say?

No, you're the ones who failed to obey the law. And you're the ones who have idolized the temple because you fail to see that it points to Jesus.

[17:55] And so he completely flips the tables and turns them on his opponents. They try to condemn him, but Stephen proves that they're actually the guilty ones.

They needed a righteous one who could keep the law for them as well as take their punishment for their failure to keep it.

They needed Jesus, who through his life and death and resurrection fulfills the law and replaces the temple. So Stephen's saying to them, they have got it all wrong, which must have been a massive insult to their pride and self-righteousness.

Because it always is. Nobody likes to hear that they've got God wrong, especially religious leaders. Nobody likes to be told that.

Nobody likes to hear that they've missed the point when it comes to Jesus. And perhaps you're in church today and you're beginning to realize this, where the only way that you and I can be accepted by God is through faith in Jesus Christ.

[19:12] That he is the righteous one who died in our place for our sin, bearing our punishment so we can be forgiven. And it's a shocking message to hear, to be told that we're not good enough for God.

And there's nothing that we can do ourselves to make ourselves good enough for God. Especially if we've lived our whole life believing that we can get there ourselves.

And yet the challenging message of Christianity, for those Stephen was speaking to, but for those today, the challenging message cuts us all down to size.

It smashes our confidence in our own ability to get right with God. And that's a challenging message that Stephen proclaimed to his listeners.

And that's our second point. First, a courageous man. Second, a challenging message. And thirdly, a costly mission. In verse 54 to 60. You know, being involved in the mission of Jesus in this world as Stephen was, is always going to be costly.

[20:28] What did it cost Stephen? Well, it cost him his life. Because the message of Jesus Christ will always produce a strong reaction in people.

Look at verse 54. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. And then there's even more rage when Stephen says what he sees in 55 and 56. 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.

So Stephen's vision here confirms that Jesus is the resurrected and glorified Lord. And so while Jesus was killed, he is now standing at the right hand of God with all power and all dominion. And what a great reassurance for Stephen to know that he was, in fact, living for something that was worth dying for.

[21:40] Because while this earthly court, you notice they condemn Stephen, but the heavenly court commends Stephen. The Jesus he lived for was ready to welcome him into heaven.

So Stephen could face death and reigns. Verse 57. At this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

So Stephen's vision of Jesus confirms that Jesus is Lord. Stephen's death was no accident, therefore. And Stephen's witness to Jesus wasn't wasted because his life was cut short. In fact, his death and his witness propelled the unstoppable mission and message of Jesus beyond Jerusalem, which is where they were, to the ends of the earth.

What happens here moves the church onwards and outwards with the gospel of Jesus Christ to people of every nation. And so Stephen's life was invested in something that was worth dying for.

[22 : 59] And so the verdict of a human court on his life didn't matter. What mattered was the verdict in heaven at the throne of God.

And really, at the end of the day, that's the only thing that matters for you and me. Not what other people think of you, not even what you think of yourself.

All that matters is what God thinks of us. What's God's verdict on your life and mine? Because it will make the difference as to where we spend and how we spend eternity.

Look at these last two verses. 59. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 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. Notice how Stephen's death is described as sleep. Because it wasn't the end.

[24 : 06] It wasn't the end because Jesus had died and was resurrected and was now reigning in heaven. In fact, the description of Stephen's death here is very similar to the death of Jesus.

I wonder if you noticed that. Both Stephen and Jesus were accused of blasphemy by false witnesses and went on trial.

Both Stephen and Jesus were accused of being against the law and against the temple. But it doesn't stop there because as both died, what do they do?

They cry out and ask for forgiveness for their killers. And Stephen commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus, just like the Lord Jesus committed his spirit to his father in Luke 23.

But Stephen's not simply following the pattern or example of Jesus. What he's doing is really pointing to the Lordship of Jesus.

[25 : 11] That Jesus is the one who grants access to God's very presence. The one who can forgive sin. And that's why there's no need for a temple.

And why we can't keep the law. Jesus does it for us. He brings us to God. Jesus fulfills this purpose. And so Stephen's showing through his words, but also in his death, that Jesus came to give us a relationship with God.

Not religion, not ritual, but a relationship with God. And so Stephen not only follows the pattern of Jesus in his death, but he points us to the hope of Jesus for our death.

Because it's through his death and resurrection that the risen Lord Jesus will welcome us into God's presence. And that's why living life for Jesus is something worth dying for.

Listen to what Jesus said himself in Mark chapter 8. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

[26 : 30] For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. So following Jesus, it won't always be easy.

That's clear. But it will always be worth it. And Stephen's life and death show us this. And so we need to be courageous men and women who are prepared not just to live for Jesus in this world, but even to die for Jesus.

Well, how is that possible? Only as we remember the one who gave up his life to die for us. As we remember the costly self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sin, then we can live and even die for him.

Because the God who was in total control as Jesus died, who was in total control as Stephen died, can be trusted with our life and our death.

And so what are you living for? Will it sustain you in life? Will it see you through death? Jesus Christ alone can do this.

[27 : 56] And that's why rejecting him, biggest mistake of history by rejecting Jesus. But see in him, the one who will see you through life and through death and into God's presence.

Los Ernest■■■■. And the other three pages and Vishal, feu's name, I'll give up your ■■■ and that's why Jeju will this act and the one who will see you for another remember. I've experimented among ourselves and the two people for one of us.

There's an animal who is to hold a human belief so that Jesus is incarnate, and that's why we hire a man and the one who will see you. It's going to be Song of yourself. I'm a lion of God. I'm a lion of God.

The race is I'm of God's. It's going to be wanted for us because there's fear the image in this kingdom and the greatness.