**Stephen’s Faith & Spirit**

Acts 7:1-60
Key Verse 7:59 *“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”*

In the last passage we learned the guiding principle of the early apostles in doing God’s work through dealing with the issue of discrimination and disunity within the church. The apostles gave first importance to God through prayer and the ministry of the word of God by selecting Stephen, Philip and five other Spirit-filled men to serve as deacons in the church. Through this decision, they not only created unity within the church but also allowed the community to expand even more. However, as the church grew in number, so did the number of their enemies and persecutors. In today’s passage, we will focus on Stephen’s defence before the Sanhedrin. Despite being on trial before the highest court in the land, Stephen stood firm and proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ through his whirlwind review of Israel’s history. Although this resulted in His martyrdom, Stephen helped lay the foundation for other Christians on how to overcome persecution; not through fear, despair or violence but with love, forgiveness and an absolute trust in God. Likewise, I pray we may display this same spirit that we may not compromise when faced with times of persecution but that we may see them as opportunities for Jesus Christ to be revealed all the more.

**Part 1: Stephen Reveals God’s Faithfulness Through God’s Promise to Abraham**

In Acts Chapter 6, we are introduced to Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power (6:8). Through the Holy Spirit, he performed many great wonders and signs among the people, helping them to put their faith in Jesus Christ. This was reason enough for people to rejoice but not everyone was happy about this as envious enemies tried to find ways to discredit him. They even persuaded others to report that Stephen spoke blasphemously against Moses and God by declaring the Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the temple and change the customs handed down throughout their history (6:14). Because of this, Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin to answer for these charges. Anyone who has ever been accused of a crime knows how terrifying an experience it is. Now imagine how magnified that feeling is when you are charged for something you are innocent of!? We would do everything in our power to defend ourselves to get others to believe us. But Stephen did not defend himself. Instead, he chooses to let the word of God be his own defence by taking the whole court and the religious authorities for a crash course Bible study of the Old Testament!

Let us read verses 2 and 3 together, ***“To this he replied: “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 Harran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’”*** God began everything through one man, Abraham. God chose Abraham to be a blessing to all people and that he would become a great nation (Gen 12:1-3). At that time, it seemed impossible for Abraham was already an old man and he was being lead to a land he did not know but Abraham still obeyed God and believed in His promise. These days people say, “Prove to me that there is a God and then maybe I’ll believe” but Abraham believed and God proved his faith in fulfilling His promise. God gave Abraham Isaac and the covenant which was passed on to Isaac, and later to his son Jacob and to the twelve patriarchs. Through referencing Abraham and the patriarchs, Stephen sough to highlight Abraham’s absolute obedience to God. Sanhedrin members took great pride in boasting that they were the very descendants of Abraham, so Stephen’s words must have sounded like music to their ears. However, they failed to inherit Abraham’s obedience. Though they claimed to be Abraham’s children, they were not doing the things Abraham did by not following Jesus. (John 8:39)

Verses 9 to 16 describe the life of Joseph and how the Lord used him to save his family. May we read verse 9 together, ***“Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him…”*** Although Joseph faced many trials in his life, God used them to raise Joseph to be Pharaoh’s right hand man, placing Joseph in a position where he was able to save his entire family from seven years of drought and famine. Joseph’s situation was similar to Jesus’ situation. Out of his brother’s jealousy Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt. Jesus was accused falsely out of the jealousy of the Sanhedrin. Both of them were rejected by their own brothers but God used them anyway. God turned their rejection to save the lives of many. God’s good purpose for Joseph prevailed over all the evils of men. The faith of Joseph overcome evil with good. Like Joseph, we should find God’s purpose in our sufferings for within them, we come to truly experience God’s grace (Romans 5:3-5). Although Israel flourished significantly during their time in Egypt, God still had more in store for them and would bring this about through another great servant of God, Moses.

**Part 2: The Life of Moses & the Trials of Israel**

Stephen devotes more than half of speech to chronicling the life of Moses and how God delivered Israel into the Promised Land. This also serves as a template for Israel’s tenuous relationship with God and His prophets. For now, let us focus on Moses’ life in three parts; from a royal prince to a lowly shepherd to a leader of God’s people.

May we read verses 20-22, ***“At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.”*** Moses was born in the midst of Israel’s darkest time in Egypt. A Pharaoh who knew nothing about Joseph, ascended to the throne, proceeded to make the Israelites his slaves and even had all the baby boys of Israel killed or drowned for fear that Israel would continue to grow in number and overthrow him. However, God spared Moses and had him raised in Pharaoh’s household so he may receive all the qualities and tools needed to be the leader for his people.

When Moses turned forty, he made a decision to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, and he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. He thought his own people would recognize him as their deliverer and rally to him and that he would lead them to freedom in a patriotic uprising. But it did not work that way. He was rejected and forced to take refuge in the desert. Moses fled to Midian to live as a foreigner with his sons. He lived with a sense of rejection and failure. His human dreams and ambition faded away. After another forty years passed by, an angel appeared to him in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When Moses went to investigate, he heard the Lord’s voice: **“I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (32)**. Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. In the past Moses was very confident that he could lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. But now he realized that apart from God he could do nothing. At last, the time came for God to work through him.

Look at verse 33. ***“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground.”*** Moses had spent the last forty years of his life in isolation and anonymity to the point where he even had trouble speaking for his only company were sheep. Even though he tried to flee from God, Moses was standing in His very presence. Now God wanted him to go before Pharaoh and lead His people out of Egypt! Look at verses 35 and 36, ***“This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.”*** In life, we face many failures and seemingly hopeless situations. One such example is sharing the Gospel to those around us on campus. Just like Moses who had the best of intentions to save his people, we are daunted by many rejections and defeats either because of the message we are sharing or the fact that we are the ones sharing the message. We often feel like we have been abandoned in a spiritual desert with no one who desires to hear the word of God. However, we need to remember how God’s presence is everywhere, even in the most inhospitable places. Just as God raised a few people to do many great works, I pray we may have faith in God that He will continue to use our small ministry to do His work here at the St. George campus and help people come to know Him even the middle of spiritual wilderness that college life often is.

Indeed, God helped Moses and the Israelites to overcome many obstacles and impossible odds, the culmination of this being their crossing of the Red Sea. But it was at this moment of exhilarating triumph and freedom that Israel experienced an even greater failure. May we read verses 39-42 together, ***“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars.”*** In the blink of an eye, the Israelites forgot about everything God had done for them and chose to worship idols of their own making instead. Whenever we think of this portion of Exodus, we get really angry and frustrated at them. “How can you be so ungrateful!?” “How can you be so stupid!?” “How can you turn to idols who can do nothing for you at the very moment God has delivered you!?” But the truth is, we are just like the Israelites in every way. Just like them, we often forget about God when times are good and turn to idols such a love, sex, power, money, success and anything else under the sun that we place above God. We devote ourselves to those idols hoping that once we gain them, our lives will be perfect. But in the end, it is our sinful pride that rejects God’s sovereignty over us and leads our down the path of every increasing sinfulness and rebelliousness. Although God would save His people so many times throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites always found themselves repeating the same mistakes to the point where the nation was invaded, destroyed and its people sent into exile. Stephen words serve as a stern reminder and warning to the Sanhedrin that they were guilty of following in their footsteps.

**Part 3: Stephen Reveals Christ through His Death**

With his review of the Old Testament complete, Stephen launches into his final, scathing conclusion in verses 51 to 53. May we read them together, ***“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”***

Let us look at the very first sentence: “You stiff-necked people!” According to the Webster dictionary, stiff-necked means “haughty or stubborn.” Stiff-necked people are very proud and set in their ways. They are also unable to turn around or see anything other than what is in front of them. Spiritually, being stiff-necked is being unrepentant and resistant to God for repentance literally means “to turn around 180 degrees.” Stephen blasts the religious authorities for their failure to learn from their own history and their unrepentance for committing the greatest sin of them all by murdering Jesus. They claimed to be the people who knew God best yet they crucified the Anointed Saviour sent by God to save them from their own sins. This speech, so true and so frank, terribly pierced the souls of all who were in the council, so that their hearts were bursting with anger and gnashed their teeth at him with rage. They were quiet when Stephen observed the history of Israel but when the finger of blame was directed right back at them and their hypocrisy exposed, their hearts were engulfed with flames of fury.

But even as Stephen was completely surrounded, he did not look towards his soon-to-be killers. Instead, he looked upwards towards Jesus and saw Him seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty (56). And even as he was being stoned to death, Stephen prayed for their forgiveness in a manner very similar to how Jesus prayed on the cross (compare verse 60 to Luke 23:34). May we read the key verse together please, ***“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (59)***. In this moment of pain and suffering, Stephen revealed Jesus’ divine and sacrificial love for them. While his body lay asleep, his spirit bore the glory of God over the sinful ways of man. Stephen’s act of martyrdom was the proof of God’s victory over death and that this victory is given to those who live by faith. Stephen’s blood became the seed of the Christian church. He was the fruit of Jesus’ death and resurrection. His martyrdom was his life testimony and a source of encouragement for all martyrs who stood firm during the impending persecutions. It became a powerful moment of the eventual conversion of a young man named Saul, whom God had chosen as his servant for the next stage of gospel advancement.

In this passage, we saw how Stephen stood firm and boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ before the highest authority in Israel. Even though he did so at the cost of his own life, Stephen uncompromisingly rebuked the religious leaders of their sins but loved and prayed unreservedly for their forgiveness. By solely relying on the word of God, Stephen embodied the very character of Jesus Christ and became a model for Christians all throughout history since. I pray we may learn from Stephen’s example so that even in the midst of persecutions and trials, we may be able to testify to Jesus Christ and to all His wonders and grace.