
Day 326 - November 22

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Martyrdom of Stephen

Readings: *Acts 6:8-8:1*

Reflections:

- **Martyrdom of Stephen:** The Greek word for “witness” is where we derive the word martyr. Stephen, one of the men selected to wait on tables was the first martyr of the early church. God demonstrates his love for the humble as Stephen is given this incredible honor as the first one willing to lay his life down in Christ-like sacrifice for the truth.
- **Charges against Stephen:** Stephen starts as a table waiter and ends up being described as “a man full of God’s grace and power” who “did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” Although religious leaders try to refute Stephen, Luke states that “they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.” The path to significant leadership is found through the doorway of humble service. They have to falsely accuse Stephen to take him to trial. Even though he is in danger of being killed, Luke writes that “his face was like the face of an angel.” What incredible peace and quiet confidence. He was radiant with God working through him.
- **Stephen’s defense:** Stephen opens his defense by demonstrating respect to his accusers. He honors them as brothers and fathers. Enemy love is often demonstrated in small, yet significant attitudes and actions. Here in the second great sermon recorded by Luke, we see another example of how the early Christians proclaimed and explained the Good News of Jesus. They did this by walking through the narrative of God’s relationship with Israel. Stephen does not argue from theology or rational deduction but from the unfolding story of God’s redemptive plan. We see here that Stephen, a common Israelite, was able to clearly tell and explain the story of God. He knew all of the key characters, plot twists and themes. When a disciple of Jesus is fully trained, they will know the story inside and out. Stephen demonstrates through recounting the story that Israel has a long established history of rejecting God’s work and persecuting those God calls as his servants. Clearly the story of Israel is the story of failure, of a nation that doesn’t get it. It is the story of what doesn’t work to change the human heart and restore intimate friendship with God. Stephen is driving the point home before he finally breaks out in a direct confrontation of the religious leaders. Although Solomon built the temple Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1,2 to make it clear that God does not ultimately reside in the temple, the building the religious leaders obsessed about. He declared that they had rejected, betrayed and murdered God’s Messiah

and fully resisted God's Holy Spirit. We see here again the strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in a very real way is the main mover of the story of the early church. All Christ-followers of all generations need to see their full life and service to God being moved and guided by the Holy Spirit. Our union with Christ is realized by God's Spirit willing our lives and relationships.

- Stephen stoned to death: It is no surprise the religious leaders are incited to murder yet again as they are confronted with the truth of their own rebellion against God. The term "gnashing of teeth" describes a deep, uncontrolled rage. God does not abandon Stephen but welcomes him into heaven, almost like Elijah being taken away in a chariot of fire. Stephen's vision represents his welcome into heaven and yet further evidence to the early church of the reality of the resurrection of the dead as Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God the Father. Some commentators note that Jesus is not seated (see Ephesians 1:15-23) but standing suggesting that he is standing to honor Stephen and welcome him into eternal life. Stephen's declaring this vision is the final straw. Those listening drag him outside to stone him. Apparently they have to take off their cloaks to be able to throw the stones well and so they lay their cloaks at the feet of Saul. Apparently he is someone of recognized authority and he is given credit as overseeing the execution of Stephen. Stephen's final act is one of enemy love. He surrenders his spirit to Jesus, kneels to pray as he is being stoned and prays for Christ to not hold their sin of murder against them. What an incredible expression of grace and mercy from this first martyr. Luke describes his death as falling asleep. This was apparently a common way to describe the death of a Christ-follower. Jesus uses this same expression in John 11:13 and Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:12-28. To be clear, it is the body that sleeps and the spirit of the Christ-follower dwells with Christ. This notion of the body sleeping awaiting the resurrection gave the first Christ-followers great courage and peace even when they faced terrible suffering and the threat of death. Sleep symbolized peace and rest. This account ends by acknowledging a new character that will become central to the story of the early Church. Saul gives approval to Stephen's death and then instigates a severe persecution against the church. At this point we would think of Saul as the new great enemy of Jesus and his church. Saul will soon become the greatest example of how enemy love can transform the ultimate opponent into your greatest ally. God's grace is bigger. We will see that over and over again in the unfolding story of what does work to change the human heart and restore intimate friendship with God.