



## Sermon Series Notes

### “A Message To Die For, A Savior To Live For” (Acts 6:8-8:1a)

Danny Hodges - NT3627

6:8-10 These “Freedmen” were Jews with Roman citizenship but who remained committed to their Jewish heritage. One very notable Freedman in this group was a man named Saul (See Acts 21:39; 22:25-28). Tarsus was the capital of ancient Cilicia; It was where Mark Antony first met Cleopatra. In my elementary school years I lived on Larkfield Circle. Van Sheely was the spoiled brat of the neighborhood, he lived just down the street on the other side of the canal. The Perrys lived two houses down and had three young sons, they lived in a fenced yard, their dad was a highway patrolman, and they were never allowed to play with my friends in the neighborhood. But one day my friends & I noticed the Perry boys were at Van Sheely’s house, playing with all the nice things Van’s grandparents had bought him. We were jealous, so from our side of the canal we began to taunt them. Words escalated til Van decided to throw a rock at us. That was a mistake. The guys on my side (Todd Shumake, Brooks Shumake, Chip Lee, Tommy McDaniel) were all pretty good baseball players. In a flash rocks were flying across the canal. I side armed one like I was making a double play from second base. It hit Tim Perry (the oldest of the Perry boys) right on the forehead, & blood began pouring down his face. Pandemonium then set in. Someone ran and told Tim’s parents. I ran home to hide, only a few minutes later to be called out of hiding by my mother, who led me into the living room where a large angry faced highway patrolman confronted me! I hit Tim with just one rock and blood was all over him. How bad it must have been when Stephen is stoned! And I cannot imagine what it was like for his family. Tim Perry got a few stitches. Stephen was killed. We know nothing about his family, but this was no doubt tremendously traumatic for them. There is a purpose behind every pain the believer has to endure in this life. And Stephen’s death was not in vain. I am reminded of Romans 8:28. Some believers in this fellowship are going through some painful, traumatic situations. But God has a purpose, & we may not fully understand until we see Jesus face to face. But one day we will understand. Until then, I am also reminded of the words Jesus sent to John the Baptist by way of some of his disciples, “Blessed are all who are not offended because of me.” Ultimately our purpose here is to glorify him, whether by life or by death. Philippians 1:20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. Earlier in Philippians 1 Paul said that the things that had happened to him had served to advance the gospel. He told the Galatian church that it was because of an illness that he had first preached the gospel to them. We never know what we might have to sacrifice or suffer for the cause. But whatever it may be, it is for an eternal cause, and an incorruptible crown. Stephen = “crown,” or “wreath.” The victor in an athletic contest is crowned with a “stephanos” (I Cor.9:25). Stephen, as a result of his faithfulness to Christ, received the incorruptible crown of life. STEPHEN’S MESSAGE

It's not a prepared message. It's one that Jesus referred to in Mark 13:11 (read); But Stephen, though speaking by the Spirit's influence, was not speaking mindlessly. He knew the potential repercussions of his message, but he spoke it anyway. Why? Because his message is a message to die for (expound). The message had two main points, one, in the history of our nation, God has worked graciously and mercifully on our behalf. Second, despite God's grace and mercy toward us, we have a history of rebellion & idolatry.

It contained a stern rebuke

II Tim.3: 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...

II Tim.4: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction.

Titus 1: 12 Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."13 This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith.

It was a very sharp message, but it was Spirit-inspired. Spirit inspired messages are not always encouraging. They are sometimes very cutting. The condition of someone's heart may determine how sharp the message needs to be. The hearts Stephen was addressing were hard, stiff-necked hearts.

Though sharp, the rebuke was a loving rebuke.

Rev.3: 19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Prov.3: 11 My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

My children have no doubt sometimes felt like I do not love them. Sometimes I have been very stern with them. But I have been stern because I love them.

See Lev.19:17 Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

Prov.27: 5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Rebuking someone is not a pleasant task, & we don't know what the response will be; Me confronting Michael Brown in a restaurant, and his response was "Who do think you are, God?"

Sometimes the instrument God uses to rebuke us makes it even harder to receive. See John 9:32-34. Their response reveals their self-righteous pride. They refused to humble themselves; King Uzziah began his reign a humble young man, but over time became proud (see II Chron.26:16-20); Eli the priest was rebuked by young Samuel (I Samuel 3); Abraham was rebuked by an unbeliever (Gen.20). But my favorite biblical story of God rebuking someone is the story of Balaam.

II Peter 2:15-16 They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. But **he was rebuked** for his wrongdoing **by a donkey**--a beast without speech--who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Go back with me to the scene of our text & let's examine the situation a little more closely. Here's Stephen, performing great wonders & signs among the people, when all of a sudden some members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen show up and began to oppose and argue with him. I have to believe Saul of Tarsus was not only a part of this group, but likely led them there. Saul is a somebody in the religious social circles of the Jews (see Phil.3:5; Gal.1:14). And to be outdone by the likes of one of the first deacons of the early church, must have enraged him. I believe it was this encounter that fueled Saul's fire in his relentless persecution of the church (see Acts 9:1). But it was also this encounter with Stephen that God would use to change Saul's life forever.

STEPHEN'S MINISTRY, BEFORE, DURING & AFTER HIS DEATH

His martyrdom sparked a massive persecution against the church (8:1b). That persecution produced an involuntary missionary movement that yielded tremendous fruit. We will look at that movement in our next study.

Stephen's life, his message, and especially how he died, became a compelling witness to Saul of Tarsus (See Acts 26:14); I believe one of the greatest goads the Holy Spirit was able to use to convict Saul was Stephen's life, his message, his death (especially the way he died). See Acts 6:8-10 (miracles, wisdom); 6:15 (his face was glowing?); Saul knew his message was right on. Saul had studied under Gamaliel, knew the Scriptures like the back of his hand, & so he knew that the history of his own people was one of repeated rebellion and stiff-neckness. And let's not forget what Stephen said just before he died (see Acts 7:59-60). Stephen's witness lasted long after he was killed; See Heb.11:4; I have little doubt that as Saul of Tarsus continued his murderous mission of persecution against the church, he could not get Stephen out of his mind. He saw his angelic face as he stood trial before the Sanhedrin, heard in his memory the main points of his message, & recounted the prayer he prayed just before he died. These were hard goads to kick against!

Mark 15:39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Now, it's likely none of us will ever die a martyr's death. Most of us are called to be living sacrifices (Rom.12:1).

Jesus said "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross daily..."

This takes us back to the words of Paul in Philippians 1.

Philippians 1:20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, **whether by life or by death**.

A living sacrifice is one that daily, repeatedly, denies themselves for Jesus' sake.

In light of this, what specific lessons can we learn from Stephen's story?

When I die to self, I am willing to say what people need to hear.

- It is becoming increasingly costly to speak the truth in the world we live in. Homosexuality is spreading like a cancer, and the only cure is the truth of the Word of God & the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am so proud of one of our long time church members who recently took a stand at her workplace. Her boss told the employees he had signed them all up for the gay pride parade, and she said she could not be a part of that. I have not heard what the repercussions of her decision was, but whatever the cost, she did the right thing.
- Bill just signed by Governor Rick Scott (Door of Hope)
- Heterosexual sin is also rampant in our world. It's pretty much culturally acceptable to live with someone outside of the bounds of holy matrimony. I shared with a clerk at Int'l Mall a couple of years ago that her living with her boyfriend was sin and she looked at me like I was from another planet!
- And to declare that Jesus is the only way to salvation makes one extremely narrow-minded.

When I die to self, I do not retaliate.

I Peter 2:23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Stephen, knowing he's gonna die anyway, could have chucked a few stones back at the ones throwing them.

God brings the example of Jesus mentioned in I Peter 2:23 right down to where we live; See I Peter 3:1, 7.

When I die to self, it enables me to sacrifice & suffer for others.

I Peter 2:20-21 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and you endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

Paul the apostle, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect."

When I die to self, I allow the Holy Spirit to fill me (Eph.5:18).

When I die to self, I can pray for those who persecute me.

Matt.5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

When I die to self, God is able to make me into the witness He desires.

When I die to self, my life will bear fruit for God.

John 12:24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

## CONCLUSION

Would you like to make a commitment to Christ to be a living sacrifice, asking the Lord to help you become the witness he desires you to be?

Has God placed a witness in your life, and the Holy Spirit is goading you to accept Christ as Savior, and become a witness for Christ yourself?

Heb.3: 7 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice,<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, <sup>9</sup> where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. <sup>10</sup> That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.'...<sup>15</sup> As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."...<sup>4:7</sup>"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."