

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 7:51 – 8:1

[Stephen speaking to the Sanhedrin said,] “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers 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 put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it”.

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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”.

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. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

‘They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose... but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.’

Acts, 6:5b, 8, 10, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Early Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against great obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

C:\ My Documents\Word\Ministry\David Ellison\
The New Testament\Acts\That Old Time Religion\12 Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...


“LEARNING TO STAND ALONE”


As the Church struggled with ‘growing pains’, they experienced problems.

In order to help alleviate these problems, seven Spirit-filled men were chosen to perform the task of serving in luncheon club whilst the apostles were freed up to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word. The members of the Early Church did not just pick anyone to serve.

‘Brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.’

Acts, 6:3, NKJV

 To serve in the Early Church, you had to be of good reputation.

 To serve in the Early Church, you had to be full of the Holy Spirit.

 To serve in the Early Church, you had to be full of wisdom.

One of those chosen to perform this important ministry was Stephen.

There are two words for CROWN in the New Testament: DIADEMA, which means ‘ROYAL CROWN’ and gives us the English word ‘DIADEM’; and STEPHANOS, the ‘VICTOR’S CROWN’, which gives us the popular name ‘STEPHEN’. You can inherit a DIADEMA, but the only way to get a STEPHANOS is to earn it. **Acts, chapters 6-7** centres on the ministry and martyrdom of Stephen, a Spirit-filled believer who was crowned by the Lord. Stephen was faithful both in his life and in his death.

Stephen’s ministry was like a meteorite flying through the night sky.

Whilst it was all too brief, it was brilliant and bright, powerful and spectacular. Of Stephen, it was noted that what he was – he was irreproachable; what he did – he was irrefutable; and what he said – he was irresistible (**Stuart Briscoe**).

Stephen learned to stand alone – and was not afraid to do so.

His secret was that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The AVERAGE Christian may or may not be filled with the Holy Spirit, but the NORMAL Christian is. It is one thing for you to have the Holy Spirit, but it is quite another thing for the Holy Spirit to have you! To be filled with the Holy Spirit means that not only does he abide in you, but he presides; not only is he resident in you, but he is president of you. Because Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, he was also full of wisdom, power and faith, which all enabled him to stand for Christ.

‘Put on the full armour of God, so that you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then...’

Ephesians, 6:13-14b, NIV

Stand up, stand up for Jesus! Stand in his strength alone;

The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.

Put on salvation armour, and watching unto prayer,

Where duty calls or danger, Be never wanting there.

George Duffield, SASB 699:3

The example of Stephen teaches us three necessities in 'STANDING UP FOR JESUS'...

1. THE WISDOM TO SPEAK FOR CHRIST

‘Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Acts, 6:9-10, NIV

Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin Council is found in Acts, chapter 7.

His tremendous message is the longest recorded in THE BOOK OF ACTS and is a review of Old Testament history. Whilst anyone can memorise the facts of the Bible and retell them, it was not Stephen's knowledge that his opposition took note of, it was that they could not argue with his wisdom. Stephen was a man who not only knew the facts of the Bible; he could retell them and apply them with unique supernatural wisdom.

From where did Stephen get this unique supernatural wisdom?

Stephen was just an ordinary man. He did not come with a PhD from Jerusalem University. What he did have was an openness to the infilling of the Holy Spirit, who alone gave him the supernatural gift of wisdom that only God can bestow.

‘If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.’

James, 1:5-6, NIV

James is writing about the ability to make wise decisions in difficult circumstances.

Whenever we need wisdom, we can pray to God, and he will generously supply what we need. Christians don't have to grope around in the dark, hoping to stumble upon answers. We can ask for God's wisdom to guide our choices.

Wisdom means 'PRACTICAL DISCERNMENT'.

It begins with respect for God, leads to right living, and results in an increased ability to tell right from wrong. God is willing to give us this wisdom, but we will be unable to receive it if our goals are self-centred instead of God-centred. To learn God's will, we need to read his Word and ask him to show us how to obey it. Then we must do what he tells us.

‘The Gift of Wisdom is the special ability God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to know the mind of the Holy Spirit in such a way as to receive insight into how given knowledge may best be applied to specific needs arising in the Body of Christ.’

Spiritual Gifts Definition

Are you afraid that you would not know what to say if God called you to stand alone?

Suppose people treat you roughly and say, "Deny Christ, or we will kill you... Deny Christ, or we will kill your children... Deny Christ, or we will put you into prison... Deny Christ, or we will confiscate your possessions and goods". Perhaps you would wonder what you would say. The Bible tells us that we should not meditate or even contemplate what we would say. There is no value in lying in bed rehearsing your response over and over again until you get some course of action that you are happy with. Jesus makes a promise that should comfort us.

‘Jesus said, “They will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict”.’

Luke, 21:12-15, NIV

You will have an opportunity, perhaps sooner than you think, to speak for Christ.

You will not be prepared to stand alone when the time comes. No university or college can adequately prepare you. No course or study can adequately prepare you. Thankfully, Jesus will supernaturally equip you to stand up and speak words that when you hear yourself saying them, will amaze even yourself, let alone those who hear!

Stephen's life was a supernatural life.

God gave him the wisdom to speak for Christ and the Bible tells us that his listeners marvelled at his wisdom and the Holy Spirit by which he spoke. Stephen knew that he was not to outmanoeuvre or outsmart the world, so he decided to let Jesus live in him and, when the time came, to stand up and allow Jesus to speak through him.

Stephen's listeners did not like what they heard.

When Jesus speaks through you, your listeners may well not be pleased with what they hear.

Paul wrote: **'LET YOUR CONVERSATION BE ALWAYS FULL OF GRACE, SEASONED WITH SALT, SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW HOW TO ANSWER EVERYONE' (Colossians, 4:6).**

We know that salt preserves, salt flavours, and salt cleanses, but salt also irritates.

Those of you who have rubbed salt into a cut will know that it burns. Salt may well irritate at first, but eventually it penetrates and it purifies. When we rub salt into the putrefying and bleeding wounds of this world, those wounds are going to hurt before they are healed.

To stand alone, you need to be filled with the wisdom to speak for Christ.

2. THE POWER TO STAND FOR CHRIST

‘Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.’

Acts, 6:8, NIV

Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin Council was full of explosive dynamite.

Stephen was acutely aware that the more he spoke the more trouble he would get himself into. He knew that things would not go well for him, yet not once did he consider taking the easy way out. With confidence in the Lord Jesus, and the courage that came to him through the power of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, Stephen stood boldly before those who had the power to put him to death.

“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.”

Acts, 7:51-52, NIV

Stephen did not say this because he had natural courage.

Just like you and me, Stephen had no natural death wish. No one likes the idea that they have opposition or enemies. No one likes the idea of being persecuted; or being persecuted to death. Stephen had supernatural courage only because he was filled with supernatural power.

Real courage is fear that has said its prayers.

Real courage is not so much the absence of fear, as it is the mastery of fear. If you have this courage then you are not afraid to tell the truth, regardless of the consequences for you personally. Real courage is the supernatural ability to tell the truth knowing that in doing so, it will bring you pain and persecution – and in Stephen's case death.

“Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell”.’

Matthew, 10:28, NIV

Who is ‘THE ONE WHO CAN DESTROY BOTH SOUL AND BODY IN HELL’?

Some make the mistake by believing that ‘THE ONE’ Jesus is referring to is Satan, the devil. However, Satan has no power to destroy your soul or body anywhere. Bible scholars refer readers of this verse to other verses in Scripture that talk about fearing the Lord. In this often misunderstood verse, Jesus reminds us all that we need to have a holy fear of the Lord.

“The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.”

Isaiah, 8:13, NIV

If you spend time kneeling before God, you can stand with boldness before any man.

Do not use the excuse that you are not naturally wired to ‘STAND UP FOR JESUS’. Stephen was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. Because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was filled with wisdom. Because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was filled with power. Therefore, he had courage to stand alone for the Lord Jesus Christ.

“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but

a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

II Timothy, 1:6-9a, NIV

To stand alone, you need to be filled with the power to stand for Christ.

3. THE FAITH TO SUFFER FOR CHRIST

“They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts, 6:5b, NIV

Stephen had faith that enabled him to suffer for Christ.

Sometimes we get the idea that if we are full of faith, then we are not going to suffer, that our faith will get us out of every kind of difficulty. Faith does not get you OUT of difficulty, it gets you INTO difficulty. Jesus did not come to get you OUT of trouble; he came to get INTO trouble with you. Faith will never keep you from suffering, but it will enable you to undergo suffering.

“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”. 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. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”.’

Acts, 7:55-59, NIV

Stephen saw Jesus in Heaven and that enabled him to undergo suffering.

Some Christians get the crazy idea that if they take a stand for Christ that somehow God is going to deliver them and they will never suffer. If you are looking for a cheap way, an easy way, a lazy way, to serve God, then forget it. If you are a person of faith that believes that you will not suffer, then your faith is a sham. It is only in suffering that our faith is truly tested.

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

I Peter, 1:6-7, NIV

“When Peter speaks of trials, he is not talking about natural disasters or the experience of God's punishments, but the response of an unbelieving world to people of faith. All believers face such trials when they let their light shine into the darkness. We must accept trials as part of the refining process that burns away impurities and prepares us to meet Christ. As gold is heated, impurities float to the top and can be skimmed off. Steel is tempered or strengthened

by heating it in fire. Likewise, our trials, struggles, and persecutions refine and strengthen our faith, making us useful to God.'

"LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE", Study Notes

Every Christian should expect persecution.

When we question "WHY SHOULD A CHRISTIAN UNDERGO PERSECUTION?" we are really asking the wrong question. What we should be asking is: "WHY SHOULD A CHRISTIAN NOT UNDERGO PERSECUTION?" If you are not undergoing persecution for the sake of Jesus, you need to ask yourself "WHY NOT?".

'Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'

II Timothy, 3:12, NIV

In the Greek language, the word for 'WITNESS' is the same as 'MARTYR'.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr; the first Christian to die for his faith. Note that Stephen was not a martyr because he died for his faith; he died for his faith because he was a martyr. Persecution does not make martyrs, it only reveals them. As you sit there listening to this message, you are either a martyr or you are not. Do you have the spirit of a martyr in your heart right now? Persecution will prove whether or not you are a martyr!

How can people undergo persecution and suffering?

'And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.'

'Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.'

Hebrews, 11:32-39, NIV

'In the year 110 AD, Ignatius, overseer of the church in Antioch, was arrested and sent to Rome for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Facing martyrdom, he wrote to the church at Rome: "Now I begin to be a disciple. I care for nothing of visible or invisible things so that I may but win Christ. Let fire and the cross, let the companies of wild beasts, let breaking of bones and tearing of limbs, let the grinding of the whole body, and all the malice of the devil, come upon me; be it so, only may I win Christ Jesus". When he was sentenced to be fed to lions, and could hear their roaring, he said, "I am the wheat of Christ; I am going to be ground with the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread".'

"FOXES' BOOK OF MARTYRS", John Foxe

The time is coming when you are going to have to stand alone.

The one and only way to successfully do this is to be filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

To stand alone, you need to be filled with the faith to suffer for Christ.

For Stephen, death meant coronation... He saw the glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him into heaven.

For Israel, Stephen's death meant condemnation... They permitted John the Baptist to be killed; they asked for Jesus to be killed; and now they were killing Stephen themselves.

For the church in Jerusalem, the death of Stephen meant liberation... They had been witnessing to the Jew first ever since Pentecost, but now they would be directed to take the message out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans and even to the Gentiles.

For Saul, the death of Stephen eventually meant salvation... He never forgot the event, and no doubt Stephen's message, prayers, and glorious death were used by the Holy Spirit to prepare Saul for his own meeting with the Lord.

'There was an atheist in a great auditorium speaking against the Gospel, against Christ, and against the Bible. He was a brilliant man. Learned, erudite, charming, and had a mind like a sharp sword and so was cutting up and slashing the Christian faith. He was doing a masterful job of it. When he had finished, there was silence and the man with a swagger about him asked, "Is there anyone here who would like to stand up now and speak a word in support of the Christian faith?" Everyone just sat there with their heads bowed, until a little girl stood up and began to sing, with a sweet and a pure voice, the melody within her heart.'

'She began to sing: STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS, YE SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS; LIFT HIGH HIS ROYAL BANNER, IT MUST NOT SUFFER LOSS. FROM VICTORY UNTO VICTORY HIS ARMY HE SHALL LEAD, TILL EVERY FOE IS VANISHED AND CHRIST IS LORD INDEED. By the time she had finished singing, there were others standing and singing with her. Some of them with tears in their eyes.'

'She sang the second verse: STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS, STAND IN HIS STRENGTH ALONE; THE ARM OF FLESH WILL FAIL YOU, YE DARE NOT TRUST YOUR OWN. PUT ON THE GOSPEL ARMOUR, EACH PIECE PUT ON WITH PRAYER. WHERE DUTY CALLS OR DANGER, BE NEVER WANTING THERE. At the end of this, most of the people were standing and singing.'

'She began to sing the third verse: STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS, THE STRIFE WILL NOT BE LONG. THIS DAY THE NOISE OF BATTLE, THE NEXT THE VICTOR'S SONG. TO HIM THAT OVERCOMETH, A CROWN OF LIFE SHALL BE; HE, WITH THE KING OF GLORY SHALL REIGN ETERNALLY. By this time, everyone was standing, and everyone was singing. Eventually, somebody asked: 'Where has the atheist gone?' He had ducked his head and gone out the side door.'

The time is now to stand up for Jesus.

The infilling of the Holy Spirit will alone enable you to stand alone. Only the Spirit can give you the wisdom you need to speak for Christ. Only the Spirit can give you the power and courage you need to stand for Christ. Only the Spirit can give you the faith you need to suffer for Christ.

"STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS!"