

Introduction: Hurricane

Last week in our Supernatural Series we looked at the structure of the early church which we labeled as the “Jethro principle.” The Jethro principle, designed by Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, organizes the church around the gifts of the people so that needs are systematically met and the church grows. The congregation selected seven men to implement this organizational model.

One of these men was named Stephen. He is described as “Full of faith, grace, and power” (v6,8-may his tribe increase). A truly remarkable man, his Greek name, “stephanos” means “crowned one” and refers to the laurel wreath conferred upon winners of the Greek and Roman games. He has the distinction of being the first layman (non-apostle/disciple) through whom God performed miraculous signs and wonders. He is also known for a bunch of other firsts which we will learn about in a minute. His inspirational story is recorded for us in Acts 6:5-7:60. That’s a lot of Scripture so today we jump straight into the highlights.

You Can’t Handle the Truth

Stephen not only trafficked in the supernatural but was also an articulate lay-preacher and brilliant apologist. While he is out spreading the Gospel, he encounters an opposition party that would like nothing more than to subdue him and stymie his message. Stephen easily argues his enemies under the table, but they are armed with the mantra that is well-worn today, “If you can’t beat them, assassinate their character, and incite a mob against them.”

They haul Stephen before the Sanhedrin, the same court that persecuted Peter and John, and charge him with blasphemy against “Moses and God,” an act punishable by death (v11). In Acts 6:15 we are told that as the Sanhedrin begin interrogating of Stephen his “face shone like an angel.” Don’t know about you but if I were the Sanhedrin, I would end the inquiry right there. They ask Stephen if the charges levied against him are true (7:1)? Remember what we said at the beginning of this series, “Never ask a preacher a question you’ll end up with more than you bargained for.” Stephen waxes eloquent for the next 57 verses and wanes only for a reason we’ll divulge shortly. He begins what I call his “You can’t handle the truth” defense by giving the Sanhedrin a short history of God’s dealings with Israel. Tragically, this history is one of disobedience, unbelief, and idol worship during which Israel was forever rejecting the men God sent to her, including the greatest one of all, Jesus Christ. Not sure Stephen ever read Dale Carnegie’s “How to win friends and influence people” however. Listen to how he ended his message (7:51-52):

51 You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 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.

Stephen knows there can only be one of two possible outcomes after such a striking sermon: 1) the Sanhedrin repent for rejecting Jesus or 2) the Sanhedrin silence Stephen forever. Either way, Stephen doesn’t care. He fiercely spoke God’s Word, consequences be damned! I would love to tell you the former happened, that the leaders realized their sins and changed their minds/hearts about Jesus. Unfortunately, they didn’t.

Listen to their reaction in 7:54:

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

I have had people leave my church because they didn't like a particular message. I have had people shout down from the balcony when they didn't like something they heard. I have even heard murmurs when people didn't like what they were hearing but I have yet to preach something that made people "gnash their teeth." Stephen sees this non-verbal sign of rage and braces for the worst

55 He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Somehow Stephen sees Jesus standing at his right hand of his Father. Every other time we see the heavenly Jesus he is sitting at the right hand of the Father. This speaks of his lofty status of authority and power. But Stephen sees Jesus standing. Why? Because as Psalm 116:15 comfortingly tells us, "precious in his sight is the death of his saints." Our deaths are precious in the sight of our Savior because we will be with him forever! That Jesus is standing suggests that he is ready to receive and honor his faithful witness Stephen into his eternal home.

Death by Stoning

Now the Sanhedrin are in full-blown temper tantrum mode. I know two-years that display better emotional management than they did that day (v57-58)

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Tragically we are seeing an elevation of persecution against the early church. When the apostles were first arrested, they were warned not to teach or preach in Jesus' name. The second time, they were warned and flogged. And now Stephen is sentenced to death by stoning. Since the days of Mosaic legislation, stoning was the standard mode of capital punishment in Israel. It was levied primarily against blasphemers, idolators, and the immoral. The condemned were thrown into a deep pit. The fall itself was designed to either to kill or cripple. If you were still alive, the "witnesses" of your crime threw rocks at you until you were dead. It took anywhere from 20 minutes to two hours to die. The stoning of Stephen, however, was as illegal as it was immoral. Only Rome could carry out a death sentence. The Jews could not do it on their own or without permission. Blinded by their malice, the Sanhedrin didn't care.

Stephen: A Man of Firsts

Stephen is the first "layperson" to preach Gospel. Stephen is the first "layperson" to be persecuted. Stephen is the first "layperson" to be martyred. And I'm sure that Stephen is the first layperson to receive the "Stephanos" "Crown of Life" mentioned in places like James 1:12 and Revelation 2:10

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Rev. 2:10 Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Stephen is also the first layperson to forgive his executioners in the same manner Jesus did (v59-60).

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.

Conclusion:

Next week we will look at the amazing good that emerged from the death of the first Christian martyr. I want to finish today, however, by emphasizing the strength God gave Stephen to not only confront the powers but also to lay down his life for the Lord. In an of itself that's mind-blowing, off the charts, inspiring kind of strength! But what's even more impressive was his strength to forgive. It's hard to forgive even minor slights, offenses, and insults but could you imagine forgiving someone that's hell-bent on taking your life? Seems beyond the possible but it isn't. Commentor William Barkley explains

**The person who follows Christ the whole way will find strength
to do what is humanly impossible.**

Let us leave today with an unshakable resolve to fully follow Christ who not only forgave us but gives us the supernatural strength to forgive others, no matter what they have done against us.