

**DEACON STEPHEN: FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH**  
**Rev. Lawrence Baldrige**  
**August 16, 2009**

What can we say about Stephen that has not already been said? He was the first Christian martyr, and he was 'faithful unto death.' As you know the book of Revelation specifically says to the church of Smyrna "Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life." That statement and that promise was fulfilled also in the life of the martyr Stephen.

All Bible students know this story very well. Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew and was preaching to the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem that Jesus was the Messiah they were looking for. Unfortunately the unsaved Hellenistic Jews, or Greek-speaking Jews, from many synagogues began to question that preaching. They brought him before their court, accusing him falsely of the same things that Jesus had been accused of. Stephen's preaching was so cutting and so powerful that they ran upon him and stoned him to death.

<sup>AC 6:8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, <sup>10</sup> but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

<sup>AC 7:51</sup> "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> 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-- <sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

<sup>AC 7:54</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>AC 7:57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>AC 7:59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> 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.

<sup>AC 8:1</sup> And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

The first thing we note about Stephen is that HE WAS A FAITHFUL SERVANT OF HIS CHURCH. He was a man who had already proved himself to be a loyal servant

of Jesus Christ and a man truly concerned about others. He is mentioned first among the newly chosen deacons, "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit;" To the members of the Jerusalem congregation, Stephen was the first and most obvious choice. Phillip's name is second, and most scholars think Phillip told Luke the story of Stephen's martyrdom. The truth of one's Christianity shines through a thousand little things one does for God, for the church and for the community, and that he does every single day. The young church saw this side of deacon Stephen and was witness to his loyal, faithful service.

Perhaps it was Stephen's concern that brought the plight of the Grecian widows before the Apostles. They were so concerned with the spread of the Gospel that they overlooked the plight of the Grecian widows. They were a lot like us. Sometimes in our concern for the most important things, we forget about the importance of human need. That has been especially true of churches, who, concerned about the souls of others, have forgotten about the needs of others. Moreover there are churches who forget about the souls of men, the most important consideration, and minister only to the physical needs of man.

Stephen held them in the proper balance. He was indeed a true deacon, for the word deacon means servant, and he was faithful in his service, both to God and to human beings. Remember what Jesus said was the greatest commandment in answer to the young lawyer: <sup>MT 22:37</sup> Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Oftentimes we lose our balance between loving and serving God, and loving and serving our neighbor. Stephen seems to have been one of those rare individuals who, in his love for God, never forgot his love for fellow human beings. Stephen was Faithful to his Church in serving God and God's people. We need to be like Stephen in our service to others both inside and outside the church.

A man once recounted the story of his mother and her Christian concern for others. She once saw a man who was clothed in poverty and pretty unsavory in his unshaven and unkempt appearance. But, her heart was touched by his plight, and she invited him to come home and eat a meal with her and her son. After the meal he looked at the lady and thanked her for the care she had showed him. The son said that the man thanked her profusely, and she, taken aback, deflected his praise by saying, "But there are many to be found out there who will show the same concern." According to the son, the man reportedly said to her, "But lady, I didn't have to find you, you found me."

Stephen was the kind of man who had his antennas up for service to others. Again, Stephen was so FAITHFUL TO JESUS THAT HE COULDN'T STOP TELLING OTHERS ABOUT HIM.

Thursday morning I was at Double-Quick talking with my friends when the

subject of martyrdom came up. I was surprised when one young man there made the statement that he would deny knowing Jesus if only one person were there and would kill him for saying he believed, but that if it were public he would go ahead and acknowledge Jesus and die a martyr. He said that he would rather lie about it to one person and live; but that he would never publicly deny Jesus as his savior. I suppose he had in mind that one young lady in the Colorado high school shooting who was killed because she refused to say she did not believe in God.

I think I would follow the example of Stephen and never deny my faith in Jesus Christ. I know that it would be hard to die for my faith, but men have denied their faith for lesser reasons. Listen to John's Gospel: <sup>JN 12:42</sup> Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved praise from men more than praise from God."

<sup>Matt. 26:35</sup> Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you!" And so said all the disciples. Out of fear, Peter denied Jesus three times, and therefore had to confess Jesus three times after the resurrection.

Many of us are like these Pharisees, and like Peter. We are so concerned about not being accepted by others that we refuse to let others know we are Christians. We are afraid we will be ostracized or marginalized or ignored by the social group to which we belong. I remember when I worked a lot with the college students of Alice Lloyd College, that I visited in the dorms and had Bible Studies with the students, and that one young man in particular told me this story. He said, "I came from the church in Garrett, and when I unpacked, I left my Bible in my suitcase, afraid that my roommate would reject me if I showed it. Well, when my roommate unpacked his clothing and had put it away, he got out his Bible and began to read it. I was surprised. But he taught me a great lesson that day. He helped me not to be ashamed of my faith."

Jesus said: <sup>MT 10:32</sup> Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father which is in heaven. And, <sup>2 Tim. 2:12</sup> If we endure we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.

Regarding confessing Jesus in Matthew 10, I remember that Brother J. S. Bell used to emphasize the fact that the Greek verb means that we are 'to confess and to keep on confessing.' As I remember, it is a perfect participle.

Stephen was so faithful to Jesus that he kept on telling others that Jesus was the Lord. He confessed Jesus daily. From the story of the synagogues of the 'freedmen' we gather that he aggressively attended these synagogues and spoke about Jesus, just as Paul did later on and nearly was martyred himself numerous times on his missionary journeys, and was finally martyred himself at the command of Nero in 68 A.D., decapitated by the Roman axe.

Obviously we need to be wise in our witness to others. I heard once about this barber who was convicted by a sermon that he should witness his faith to others at every opportunity. A customer entered his barber shop with the request for a shave and a haircut. The barber, trying to work up enough courage to witness to this young man, lathered his face gently, put the towel around his neck, put the razor to his face, and said, “Young man, are you ready to die?” That young man ran screaming from that barber shop!

The Bible tells us to be as ‘wise as serpents, but as harmless as doves.’ I must confess that at a certain point, however, Stephen was not gentle. He was a lion and not a lamb. Circumstances determine how we should witness, I believe. I have always felt that witnessing should be within the context of conversation and should be natural and normal. It should not be obtrusive and showy. It should not be judgmental. It should be done in love and in humility.

I have seen the faces of drug addicts being preached to by men who had no inkling of their struggle, and no compassion for what they were experiencing. If these preachers had just allowed the compassion of Jesus to flow through them, the addicts would have not felt so dehumanized and degraded.

On the other hand these Grecian Jews were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and mind. <sup>AC 7:51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!”

Sometimes sharp words must be used in our witnessing. Stephen was so faithful to Jesus who had saved him that he could not help telling the world that Jesus Christ was the only Savior and the only Lord.

Stephen was FAITHFUL. HE WAS FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH. <sup>AC 6:15</sup> All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. The highest court of all Israel would try Stephen. The witnesses appeared and gave false testimony about him. But the witness of God was in the face of Stephen--he shined in that courtroom, he shined for Jesus!

Dear Christian, are you shining for Jesus? Is His Love shining through you? Is His grace in your heart and upon your face? In a mission school in Japan a Buddhist believer brought her young daughter to school there for admission and said to the principal, “I do not want her to become a Christian, but I do want you to teach her so that her face will shine like your other students.”

I met a friend at Big Lots the other day, a pastor of another denomination. He loves to sing, and he loves a good joke. He said that a member of the community told him that he heard laughter coming from his church. He told that person that that was good, and that Christians had something to laugh about and something to be joyful about. We need to shed our puritanical garb that we inherited from the dead serious people who were our religious ancestors. The Christian faith is about joy.

But Stephen was facing death, and he knew it. He was FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH in his joy in the Lord. There is no sadness for one dying in the Lord. The friends may be sad, and the family may be sad, and the community may be sad. All of us have been sad this past week over the untimely and tragic deaths in Knott County. But to Stephen and to all that know Jesus as Savior and Lord, there is no real sadness in death, there is only celebration and joy.

After my colonoscopy on Thursday I played a round of golf with Darrell Combs on Friday. As I left the golf course I heard a couple of men discussing death and how immediate it can come to anyone. I used the occasion to witness. One friend there was a member of the Allen Methodist Church. He said, "Preacher, you're absolutely right. Death is graduation day for the Christian." Even death itself, which ends everything good for some, can only add good and completion and satisfaction to the Christian.

Listen: <sup>AC 7:54</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen did not see God, but He beheld 'the glory of God.' He saw that powerful bright glory that surrounds the holy God whose face no man living has ever seen, and whom only Jesus had seen and declared. But, beloved, He saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. Not sitting as Lord, but standing as Friend, ready to receive His faithful martyr into His glorious home and to crown him Himself with a crown of righteousness, with a martyr's crown, with the crown of a faithful-unto-death martyr.

Listen again: <sup>AC 7:59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> 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.

Till His death, Stephen was a FAITHFUL SERVANT. Did you hear his prayer. He is saying in effect, "Lord Jesus, my body is broken with these stones, my body cannot live. But my spirit can live with you throughout eternity. So receive my spirit. Just as you cried out in your last earthly moment, "Into thy hand I commend my spirit" into your hand, my Jesus, I commend my spirit."

But in that last moment of agony he thought again about Jesus asking God to forgive His crucifiers, faithful Stephen prayed an intercessory prayer for them, "Lord, forgive them for this sin. Don't charge it to them. They do not know it, but they are doing a wonderful thing for your church and for me. Forgive them."

I am not sure I could say that in such a circumstance. I must believe, therefore, that Stephen was more like Jesus than any other disciple. Later James would be martyred. Then one by one the other disciples. And later hundreds and thousands of others.

One other that was martyred was Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, where the spirit told John to tell the church to be Faithful Unto Death. Polycarp was! As this old bishop was cajoled and encouraged to spare himself death and to deny Jesus. He replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me harm. How can I deny my Savior and my King?" Then he was martyred at the stake, faithful unto death.