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## *A Theology of Martyrdom, Pt 3*

### **Acts 7:51-60**

**Keywords:** Acts 7, Suffering, Persecution, Martyr, Will of God, Goodness of God; Endurance, Satan, Perseverance

**PowerPoint Presentation included:** none

**SermonAudio Blurb:** Persecution and martyrdom are frightening for many as they see the many changes occurring in America today. What once seemed so far away is now quite near and some are even now experiencing a level of persecution they never imagined. But this is not something new. The bible is clear about it and its certainty. So how ought the Christian view this? That is the goal of this message. In this third message we will consider how Satan uses persecution to silence the Church and how persecution itself reveals the genuineness of a person's faith.

#### **I. Introduction.**

- A. Read 51-60.
- B. We continue in our study of Stephen, the first martyr of the Church. The passage is rich with many points of biblical truth that we have already seen.
  - 1. We saw how quickly the infant church in Acts went from favor with the people to murderous rage.
  - 2. We saw that the rejection of the Church had nothing to do with the people, but with their message. As long as the Church is not focused on calling people to repent from sin and turn to Jesus alone for forgiveness and salvation, it will be welcomed.
  - 3. We saw that Stephen was a man who knew the bible, specifically the Old Testament, and all of those years of his youth was spent learning the Word so that now he had a well-spring of knowledge from which to preach.
  - 4. We saw how the Holy Spirit convicts people of their sin and how it brings forth one of two responses: repentance or rejection.
  - 5. We saw the way the Holy Spirit empowers a person to be able to withstand even the reality of a violent death.
  - 6. We saw the way God gave sustaining and encouraging grace to Stephen so that he would be able to see Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of the Father even before he died.

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7. And we saw how the Holy Spirit worked in the heart of Stephen so that as the stones rained down upon his body he would then ask God to forgive his attackers.
- C. What we see here is simply Christianity on display.
1. When you make Christianity simply a set of facts or propositions you miss the whole point.
  2. It is not just a story. It is the reality that the problem with each of us and with this whole world is sin.
  3. But Christianity is also the truth that God does not leave us in that impossible position.
  4. But Jesus' death is still not all that happens. So Christ rose on the third day as He promised. Thus securing not merely the forgiveness of sin but the promise of life with Him.
  5. This is the good word to us. We are called to believe it and then cling to it and conform our lives around it and God.
  6. The Christian faith is the ultimate in both optimism and pessimism because it recognizes that this age is passing away. All that the whole of the humanity has ever known or experienced is but a fleeting shadow or mist, soon to be gone.
- D. We have considered two principles related to persecution and martyrdom: (1) it is to be expected and (2) we are to not fret over it but be faithful in how we conduct our lives.
- E. Today we will consider the third principle related to persecution and martyrdom. The third is that persecution and martyrdom are works of Satan, not merely humans.

## **II. A Basic Theology of Martyrdom.**

- A. Principle #3: Persecution is a tool of Satan not just of flesh and blood.
1. In the book of Revelation (2:10) we see Jesus warning and encouraging the church in Smyrna that the devil was about to cast some of them into prison.
  2. The structure of vs 8-10 is one of a series of contrasts:

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3. Note the variety of suffering and persecution:
  - a. There are physical hardships.
  - b. There are financial hardships.
  
  - c. Blasphemous slander.
    - (1) This evil speech was directed to these Christians from unbelieving Jews.
      - (a) They were Jewish in their heritage but not in their faith. Their Messiah had come and they rejected Him and even nailed Him to the cross.
      - (b) These are the same sort of Jews as Stephen encountered in Acts 7, religious, knowledgeable, and enemies of Jesus Christ.
    - (2) And now, fifty years later, they were still nailing Him to the cross by openly opposing and speaking evil lies against His Body there in Smyrna.
  - d. So they are described as belonging to the “synagogue of Satan.”
    - (1) Remembering that “Satan” literally means “adversary” and you get the sense of their opposition and slander.
    - (2) These were men and women who lived out the lifestyle of their father, the devil.
    - (3) *“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (John 8:44).
  - e. What is key to note is how this is an event that is being instigated by the devil.

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- f. They were not going to escape it, it was part of God's will that they suffer. And so He tells them to be faithful.
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4. The whole of the Christian faith is based upon truth and Satan is the father of lies. He stands against truth. And as you talk to friends and as you conform yourselves into the likeness of Jesus and your lives change, truth is proclaimed. And Satan is stirred up to hatred.
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5. Luke 21:6-19.
    - a. Jesus begins with a description of the coming destruction of Jerusalem that would occur in 70 A. D. But then it is obvious that He expands it into a much longer time frame as nations war and kingdoms rise and fall (10ff).
    - b. This is a description of what people will do when empowered by Satan.
      - (1) 1 John 5:19, *"We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."*
      - (2) *"You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44).
      - (3) Satan stirs up the sin within the hearts of people. The hidden things borne out of envy and desire. The sense of self-centeredness that demands its own way first.
    - c. Nations will hate you.
    - d. Parents and family will hate you.

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- e. Some of you will die.
  - f. But you will, in reality, not be harmed (18).
6. 1 Peter 5:8-10.
- a. Two commands (8).
  - b. But why? Because you have an adversary. But do you truly grasp this?
    - (1) Consider your ways and ask yourself how often do you gird up your mind to be sober and cautious? To think on the things you desire or plan to do with a sense of distrust?
    - (2) When was the last time you asked yourself where your adversary fit into the things happening in your life and those around you?
    - (3) This prowling of the devil is in the present tense. He is ever wandering looking for prey. His servants do the same. But do you consider it?
  - c. The depth of hate Satan has for every Christian is beyond my ability to describe. He is angry all the time. And nothing stirs that anger up more than a bold Christian.
  - d. So what are we to do? (9).
    - (1) We resist him. How? Two ways: By remaining unmoved in the truth of the gospel. And knowing that we are not alone in this suffering.
    - (2) Church history is filled with accounts of men and women, both young and old, who looked at their impending death and laughed.
  - e. But why do we stand fast in our faith? Why does a Christian not fail when the fulness of the wrath of Satan is poured out upon his body? (10)
    - (1) Because you are safe in Christ.
    - (2) Because God is the God of all grace. Grace that will carry you to the end. Grace that will open your mouth to speak truth. Grace that emboldens you and grace that consoles you.

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### **III. Conclusion.**

#### **A. John 17.**

1. Here we have a wonderful opportunity to see how Jesus prayed to God the Father. This is, in many ways, the true Lord's prayer.
2. There are several points running through the prayer but I want to focus on how Jesus interceded on our behalf on the eve of His trial and crucifixion.
  - a. First, there is a theme regarding a Christian's relationship to this world, meaning this fallen realm that is passing away.
  - b. Second, this idea of not belonging to this world does not mean that we do not live in this world, but that we don't belong to it anymore.
  - c. Third, the life and perseverance of believers is bound up in the power and care of God.
  - d. Fourth, this power behind the world systems is not human, but Satanic and so Jesus also intercedes for us.

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- Therefore, while we are to be aware of Satan's efforts to harm us, we are not to be silenced by his efforts. Rather, by being men and women of the Word, resting on the promises of God, proclaiming the gospel to a dying world; we are to live as aliens and strangers, faithful to the end.

### **Benediction**

**Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing the good news of Jesus Christ, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen**