

Scripture Reading:

Acts 6: “9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said,

"This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.”

Acts 7:1 “1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"...[Stephen then gives his defense which we will study as our text for this morning] 54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But [Stephen], being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

"Stephen Makes His Defense"

Stephen had stirred up quite a controversy by just being a faithful Christian servant, willing to do what God had commanded him to do and willing to give a defense of the faith when presented the opportunity Now Stephen has been hauled before the full Sanhedrin for trial and we will read his defense this morning, in fact that will be most of my sermon.

Hearing a large portion of the Scripture read from the pulpit should remind us of two important principles about the Bible: First, it is good to HEAR the Word of God. We often see places in the Bible where Scribes and even Kings read the Law to the people. Many of you are using audio Bibles to listen when traveling or at home and I think this is a good thing

The second thing to remember is that the context and type of passage are always important- Stephen presents his defense before the Sanhedrin and it appears that Luke has recorded his entire discourse. Now it can be studied at great length and we will be considering smaller portions in the coming weeks... BUT we must remember that it was given at one time and that it is good to read it in its entirety as well.

The great Sermon on the Mount that was given by Jesus and recorded by Matthew is another example: Some pastors have given many sermons on this text that can go on for years and many books have been written mining the depths of knowledge and wisdom that Jesus shared.

➤ BUT again, at times we should read the entire sermon through, perhaps out loud!

We need to make sure that we take the time occasionally to absorb the larger portions of the Scriptures... Imagine getting a long letter from mom or someone special and just reading a few sentences at a time! Sure you might go back over it many times and think about what was meant by a certain paragraph, but you are going to read the letter in its entirety as a letter:

Not sure you have the time or endurance to handle this? ... For those of you who are regular readers, how many times have you looked up from reading the morning paper to notice that more than an hour has gone by? Or have gotten caught up in a novel that you read in a day or two?

For you that do not consider yourselves to be readers, this can serve as an admonition to be more faithful in this area... You might be like me a read a little slower because of all that great training we received in the government schools, but I am sure there is time that can be made... Giving up one of those videos or some Television each week or a few less hours on-line for starters!

- Reading God's Word, and reading in general, need to be priorities in our lives if we are going to follow Stephen's example and be ready to give an answer for the faith!

Now, so I am not misunderstood, reading large portions of God's Word to help understand the big picture does not replace our meditation on God's Word: *[discuss the Psalm 119 example or the Sermon on the Mount]*

So with that in mind we will take the time this morning to read through Stephen's defense before the Council, remembering that this is the same Council, likely sitting in the same chamber where they judged Jesus and confronted Peter & John and then all the Apostles.

I have read Luke's account of what happened before and after this great discourse to help us see the context. We saw how Stephens's actions leading up to this trial brought forth a face that appeared as an angel. We had some good follow-up discussions on this from last week and need to remember that this would not have been one of those sweet cherub faces we often think about:

I suspect that Stephan's face would have been more like the Old Testament appearances that had to be followed by 'fear not.'

- Stephen was coming before them as one who spoke with authority and they could see this in his face.

My intention is to read through this passage without interruption so you can sit back & hear Stephen's defense... Remembering that he had been accused of blasphemous comments about God and about Moses. He had been accused of distorting the proper view of the Law and the Temple. Listen now to how Stephen makes his defense before this council: 2 And [Stephen] said, 'Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' 4 Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. 5 And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. 6 But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 7 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.' 8 Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. 9 "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

11 Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13 And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh.

14 Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. 15 So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. 16 And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. 17 "But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt 18 till another king arose who did not know Joseph. 19 This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live. 20 At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months. 21 But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

23 Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. 25 For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?' 27 But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. 30 And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. 31 When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, 32 saying, 'I am the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. 33 'Then the Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. 34 I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." '

35 This Moses whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years. 37 "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.' 38 This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 41 And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. 42 Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: 'Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 43 You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'

44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, 45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.

47 But Solomon built Him a house. 48 However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, Or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?' 51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." [then, as we have read earlier...]

54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

In the coming weeks we will consider the various portions of this defense given by Stephen before the council. For today, I want us to think about the importance of reading such passages in their entirety and in their proper context as we have discussed.

I also want us to ponder again whether we take seriously the need to know the Word of God.

- **Could you recount the history of Israel in this way?**

Remember, Stephen was not an Apostle nor even an elder in the Church at Jerusalem. He had been called and ordained to serve tables, which he did well.

- **And yet he was ready and willing to give a defense of the faith in a very hostile setting before a very hostile council**

This required two things that we should desire and practice in our lives, no matter where God has called upon us to serve. Whether we are doing those dishes or hauling the garbage or whether we are serving as a pastor or mayor of the city...

- **We must all be ready and willing to give a defense of the faith!**

Although many of us are sure we could not testify as Stephen did, we need to remember that such a faithful testimony only requires two simple things:

- **First we must trust that the promise given by Jesus is true!**
- **The Holy Spirit has come as our comforter and He will give us the words to say in such times, as He obviously did here with Stephen.**

HOWEVER, we must also remember that God honors our obedience...

- **We have the responsibility to know the truth and the great story of God's redemption**
- **In other words, we must know our Bibles!**

We must know ALL of our Bibles and we must have read it, meditated on it, studied it and wrestled with it in conversations with other Christians.

We must be faithful to attend worship where we are instructed from God's Word!

- **It is our faithful obedience and the obedience of those who have trained us that properly prepares us.**

Baseball season is upon us so allow me to use the example of America's favorite pastime as a useful comparison... If you take someone who has never watched a baseball game, does not know the rules and has never discussed the players or the teams with anyone and put them in front of a typical game, they would be VERY bored and certainly they could not explain what is going on.

- **Baseball fans who enjoy the game know the rules, know the teams, know the players and even the stadiums where the games are played.**

They know all this from watching a lot of baseball, reading about the games, listening to the commentators and talking about the games and players with others who have an interest in the sport.

- **I am not here making a judgment about whether baseball can be an idol in someone's life:**

I know examples of fans which I have just described who are faithful Christians and others who have absolutely no interest in Jesus. The comparison I want us to see is how this matches up with how familiar we are with God's Word and His Great Story...

- **Do we regularly fellowship with God's people?**
- **Do we regularly read God's Word and study the history of God's people?**
- **Do we know their names and stories?**
- **Are we familiar with Church history and consider where the Church is today?**
- **Do we wrestle with all of these subjects with our brothers and sisters the way those baseball fans do?**

If we answer yes to most of those questions then we are likely prepared to give a defense when the time arises. We are ones the Spirit will give the right words to say at the right time.

As parents we need to remember that this is what is called for in raising faithful covenant children. Many children grow up to be BIG fans of the sports teams that their parents support because that is what they are constantly exposed to! It is not a sin to have you son or daughter see you reading the sports page every morning and talking about the BIG play from yesterday's game with your friends... But it is sin and a BIG problem if they do not also see you reading your Bible every day and participating in discussions about what it means for Jesus to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and how the Bible should impact our lives each and every day!

- **Let us strive to be a people of the Word, ready and willing to have the Spirit of God use us when and where He see fit.**

Let us understand why Jesus confronted Satan with this great truth during His temptations:

- **"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"**

The Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God is the only offensive weapon presented in Ephesians six, we cannot go into battle without it!

And finally, even when Paul is giving his amazing instructions to husbands and wives as he calls all of us to submit one to another, we see the importance of the Word of God:

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

- **May it be so with ALL of us!**