

Connect & Reflect

Wednesday, 9/11/19

SERMON SUMMARY

Martyred for the Faith

Acts 7

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:54-60, ESV).

We live in a part of the world where we don't experience religious persecution, and certainly not martyrdom, so it's hard for us to relate to this story. But it ought to challenge us. Stephen was the first one who experienced what Jesus had promised earlier to the apostles—that some who followed him would give their lives. We should spend some time familiarizing ourselves with how some followers of Jesus are being persecuted in the world right now. Go to <https://www.persecution.com/> for more information.

What kind of sermon would provoke this kind of outrage? To understand that, we need to read what Stephen preaches. He gave a beautiful summary of what we sometimes call the "scheme of redemption"—the biblical story that shows how God reconciles his creation back to himself. In the sermon Stephen responded to the four charges the religious leaders had made in the previous chapter. They had accused him of blaspheming God, Moses, the temple, and the law, but Stephen countered those charges by explaining how the biblical narrative actually points to Jesus.

It's a beautiful story, and one that completely reshapes our lives when we believe it. In fact, it's the only story that's worth dying for.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Start Praying

- 1) How can our class pray for you or a friend or loved one tonight?

Start Reading (read Acts 7:54-60)

- 2) As you read the text, what questions or observations jump out at you?
- 3) Why do you think Luke mentions Saul's presence here?

Start Thinking

- 4) How would you summarize the historical part of Stephen's sermon in a couple of sentences (Acts 7:2-50)?
- 5) Discuss how much courage it must've taken for Stephen to say what he said in 7:51-53? Was it unnecessarily harsh?

Start Sharing

- 6) Do you have a story to share in which you or someone you know was persecuted for your (or his or her) Christian faith? What happened?
- 7) Spend a few minutes discussing what you know of what Christians in difficult parts of the world are experiencing because of their faith.
- 8) Christians shouldn't seek persecution, but do we sometimes keep silent out of fear when perhaps we ought to speak up?

Start Doing

- 9) Stephen paints a beautiful picture with his summary of the biblical story. If we believe that story is true, how does that cause us to live even in the face of opposition?
- 10) What could we as believers do to have solidarity with other believers in the world who are suffering persecution right now?

Start Praying (ACTS acronym)

- 11) **A**doration: Worship God in prayer for Jesus' sacrifice.
- 12) **C**onfession: Confess that we sometimes have allowed fear to cause us to be silent when we should've spoken up for the faith.
- 13) **T**hanksgiving: Thank God for his promise to be faithful to his promises and to be present with us even when unbelievers persecute us for our faith.
- 14) **S**upplication: Pray for believers in North Korea, China, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and other countries where they are being persecuted.