

Title: The Cost  
Text: Acts 6.8-15  
Theme: The arrest of Stephen  
Series: Acts  
Prop Stmtnt: A bold witness is an invitation for persecution

Read Text:

Christianity has enjoyed an unusual season of acceptance and toleration in this country. I say unusual because much of our history as Christians in this world is one of rejection, persecution, ridicule and hostility. But, for many of us, that has not been our experience. There was a day when if you wanted to build your client base as an insurance salesman, you were coached to join a prominent church in town. If you wanted to run for a political office, you would include your church membership on your literature as a way of establishing credibility. If you went to a Christian high school or college, it was not a big deal. Associating yourself with Christians was a culturally accepted thing to do. It appears that the sun is setting on those days.

One of the things that is so refreshing about the book of Acts is the fact that Luke does not hide the fine print in the back of the book (know what I mean?). Oh no! He gives us the whole picture by making us aware of the problems from within and the persecution from without. It is helpful to remember that Luke is writing this account of the early history of the church and the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome for the purpose of completing the story of Jesus that he started in his gospel account we call Luke. He wrote this for a man he called Theophilus so “*that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*” (Luke 1.4)

We need the whole story. We need to know about the good days and the hard days. We need to know about the growth of the early church and of the blood that was shed. There is both glory and grief here and it often comes at the same time. You need to know this. Life as a follower of Christ is not all about glory and neither is it all about grief. You should not be surprised by either.

If you have come here, perhaps at the invitation of a friend and you are slightly curious about what it means to be a follower of Christ, this is a good text of Scripture for you to hear and consider. You need to be fully informed that there is a cost to being a follower of Christ. We know that. We do not necessarily enjoy it, but we accept it. Last week, Austin, Josiah and Roan told us that they had become followers of Christ. Austin, Josiah and Roan, this is a good text for you. Your days on this earth following Jesus are not all going to be easy, as you probably already know. There is a congregation here, a family here who will pat you on the back, will embrace you, will pray with you, will stick with you, but there are people in your world who won't. They do not love Christ, in fact, in many cases they will hate the very things that you embrace. This text informs you of what you may be called to experience.

### I. **Following Christ is an invitation for persecution.** (8-10)

Persecution is not a surprise twist in the story. The church was founded upon the gospel that was accomplished by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By chapter 4, two leaders,

Peter and John were warned by the authorities not to speak in the name of Jesus. A chapter later, this warning was renewed, this time with a flogging. This third arrest and interrogation will raise the stakes higher. Stephen will be killed. But, the story is bigger than Stephen and one man's experience of persecution because he spoke up for Jesus. The execution of Stephen ignites an open hunting season on all the members of the early church. Many of them flee Jerusalem and when they go to Judea, Samaria and to other regions, they take the gospel with them, just like they were told. This is good to remember because as we read this account about Stephen, our hearts are going to be heavy. Stephen was a good guy. He was one of those guys that you need more of. You need guys like this around and to lose someone like him is hard, really hard. So, it is so good to remember that the persecution of Stephen is not the end of the story. Let's dig in.

#### **A. The early church had some wonderful leadership. (8)**

Chad explained last week, that the early church had to address some practical concerns. Some of the widows they were caring for, were not getting meals like they should. So, the church appoints a group of men to address this problem so that the apostles could continue to preach and pray. These men become the forerunners of what will become the position of deacon. What an incredible blessing these brothers were to the church.

Look, I know that it is trendy and even assumed for people to roll their eyes and let out a frustrated grunt when speaking about leadership in a church, and, there are reasons for that at times. But, when there is good leadership, sincerely seeking to do the right things, that is a beautiful gift to a church. And that should be affirmed, appreciated and encouraged. Stephen was a gift to this church. He was full of grace and power. Wow! What a compelling and helpful combination of traits this is. He was full of grace. He was a man who loved to give you what you didn't deserve – in a good way. He was a generous man. And while the Spirit of God empowered him to do signs and wonders, these were not done in a self-serving manner. Whatever he did, perhaps healing people, probably casting out demons, but all of this was done for the purpose of spreading the gospel.

What do you do with a guy like this? He was so kind, that if you bumped into him, grace splashed out. He was so helpful, that if you needed something supernatural, he was often a means to providing it. He had a power, an intrinsic authority that could not shut down. Then we find out that on top of that, this guy knew the Bible and he knew that it was all about Jesus and he could show you that. So, as a Jew, he would go into synagogues, which he was permitted to do, and would show his fellow Jews from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. He was so convincing by his life and by his teaching, that there was no argument that could be used against him. Stephen had to be a huge encouragement to the early church – so much so, that when they were selecting the first band of leaders after the apostles, he is named first. But...

#### **B. Godliness can arouse the deepest hostility. (9-10)**

Some of you are very, very nice. You are helpful to others at school. You are a kind neighbor. You are a good worker. You show up on time. You work hard. You get the job done. You don't complain. You go above and beyond. You volunteer for the tough stuff. You are dependable. But, because you are a follower of Christ, you do not approve of, or go along with anything that

is unethical, immoral, or even shady. There are jokes you don't laugh at. Places you don't go. Things you won't do. Your presence is a threat. Why are you a threat? Why was Stephen a threat? What he said, and how he lived revealed the fact that there were other people who were wrong. Austin mentioned it in his testimony last week. The law of God is written on our hearts. (Romans 2.15) People try to suppress it (Romans 1.18) They try to ignore it. They try to pass laws against it. But, it's God's law, it cannot be changed, and God wrote it on our hearts, therefore, we can't away from it. So, mankind has one of two choices: 1) Let the law of God do what it is intended to do and make you see how much you need Jesus or 2) Rail against God's law. Hate God's law. Seek to destroy those who by their life and words expose you. That is what happened here. Stephen's life and logic exposed the sin (personal wrongness) and the wrong belief of those in the synagogues – and they hated him for it.

Even though the Temple was in Jerusalem, there were synagogues in that city, as well. Like a mosque for Muslims, a synagogue is also a meeting place, but for Jews in a community so they can talk about issues that affect them, eat together, collect money to help with the needy in the area, provide religious education for the children, read the Torah and discuss it. It was and in many cases still is, a community center. Stephen, as any Jew would have had an opportunity to enter into the life of the synagogue and talk about the Torah and how it pointed to Christ, and he did. It is not clear from the text whether this happened primarily in one synagogue where these various groups of Jews met, or this took place in several synagogues, but Stephen visited, and he spoke about Christ. We already know that

Last year Northern California experienced some horrific fires which destroyed entire communities. One of the contributing factors in the death toll was the fact that in some areas there was only one road that led in and out of a community and as people were trying to flee, the road became blocked by the fires, then congested by the traffic and people were trapped in their vehicles with nowhere to go. So, when the fire raced over the landscape driven by the howling winds, people were trapped. Now, imagine that you are in the area and were planning on driving on that road and you are using your phone to help you navigate when your phone goes into major alert mode and warns you of the danger ahead and tells you to turn around. Well, that messes with your plan. This is not what you had scheduled for the day and besides you don't like anyone telling you what to do, especially your phone so you throw it out the window so you don't have to look at it. Your reaction is deeply personal, but it is not logical. That is what happened here. They have no compelling argument to make against Stephen, so they try to throw him out the window, so they can drive to their death. Look at what they do.

## II. **Persecution will not be fair.** (11-14)

If you don't like the message – kill the messenger. It happens and it happened to Jesus and the same thing is happening to Stephen. The movement against Stephen starts privately like a whisper campaign. They accuse him of things that are not true. They are successful in getting the people and the elders and the scribes stirred up against him until they “came upon him, seized him and brought him before the council.” The charges are way more emotional than they are substantive. The movement is judge, jury and executioner. Stephen is guilty before the trial begins.

In chapter 4 Peter and John were arrested, then let go. In chapter 5, the apostles are arrested, then beaten, but released. Now, Stephen is arrested, but he is not released. Are the apostles better than Stephen? No, that is not the point. In chapter 12, James is arrested and executed. Then Peter is arrested, but he miraculously escapes. Is Peter better than James? No.

Beloved, this is hard to hear, but necessary to understand. What happened to Stephen was not fair and Stephen's family and friends had to deal with that and it was hard. But, while it was not fair, it was not meaningless as we will look at in a minute. If you are a follower of Christ, do not be surprised when you are held to a different standard. Do not be surprised when you are lied about and even defamed. I tell you that because this is not only what happened to Stephen, it happened in the ultimate sense to Christ. Christ was condemned to die, in the immediate sense because the Sanhedrin condemned him. But, in the ultimate sense, Christ died because he was condemned by our sin. (the gospel) The immediate sense was what people were doing, the ultimate sense was what God was doing. The death of Christ was not fair, but neither was it meaningless.

When you experience persecution and it is legitimate persecution, it's hard. You are tempted to be angry and frustrated because it is not fair, and it is not fair. Do not be surprised by that. Sometimes you are vindicated here and now. Other times you aren't. But, the fact that you live with the effects of something that is not fair, does not make life meaningless. At this point in the story, we do not see how all of this is going to play out, but it does in an incredible way. Do not allow the immediate discouragement to blind you to the ultimate plan.

Most of you are probably aware that our nation is dealing with a major opioid problem. There are a number of contributing factors to this, one of them being that many people wrongly believe that they should never have to experience pain. But, again, as that brilliant theologian, Wesley said in "The Princess Bride", "*Life is pain highness, anyone who says differently is selling something.*" If you understand your Bible, you understand that we live in a world that is not fair because this world is under the curse of sin. Things happen that are not fair. We live east of Eden. Life is pain. And while there may be some things we can do to minimize the pain, it is simply wrong and dangerous to think that we should never experience pain. But, this is what the prosperity gospel preachers and teachers promise. If you follow them. If you give your money to them. If you just believe enough in yourself, if you find the keys of spiritual power you will have a blessed life free from disease, free from poverty, free from adversity, free from problems. That didn't work out too well for Stephen, for James, for Paul, for Peter, for John, or for Jesus. Following Jesus means that we answer the call to carry a cross. But, the call to carry the cross, is not the end of the story.

### III. **Persecution provides a platform to display God's glory.** (15)

Go back to verse 10 and I want you to feel the cumulative weight of Luke's use of the word, "they". They are ganging up on Stephen. Like Jesus, Stephen is standing here alone. Now, it appears that this happened secretly, then suddenly, so that the apostles probably had no idea that this was taking place until it was too late, otherwise, they and probably others would have tried to stand with him. But, the deck was stacked against Stephen and it was very obvious that this

was not going to go well. And, of course everyone is staring at him. It sounds like many of them were glaring at him. “all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

Stephen was described as being full of grace and power (v.8). This is grace under fire. This is power, not as the world understands power, but the strength that comes from the Spirit to rest, to abide, to trust, to see what others do not.

Look at the contrast between Stephen and the council. The council were the men sitting in the seats of power, but they had no real power. Stephen had no seat of power, but he was the one who could not be controlled. He entrusted himself into the hands of the One who is power and who is grace and who is God. And because of that, Stephen is imaging and reflecting the glory of Christ and they are attacking him because of that. Stephen is totally at rest with this.

This council is not in charge. They don't get the final word. Oh, they may condemn him. They may even kill him. But Jesus said that he was going to build his church and that the gates of hell itself could not stand against it. But how? How does Christ do this? How does Christ empower the church to withstand and endure? It is not through the power of numerical superiority. It is not through monetary muscle. It comes through the reactions and decisions and relationships that can only be explained by the gospel.

You live in a world that does not know that. I was reminded of that recently. When in Florida with our daughter, we decided to go to the Magic Kingdom and we stayed late enough to see the new light show which was spectacular. But the whole ended with the narrator saying, “You're the key to unlocking your own magic.” And I thought, oh no I'm not. Not me. If I'm the key to unlocking the magic, then we are going to be really short on magic. Nope, I'm not buying what you are selling. I can't make my dreams come true or anyone else's. I am not the Savior. I am not in charge. I need to Jesus. And when you have Jesus, nothing else matters. Even if the world is against you. Nothing else matters and you can rest in that.

If you do not yet know Christ – what do you do with this?

If you follow Christ – how should you think about adversity, persecution and suffering?