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# The Stephens Witness Pt1

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 23 August

Matthew 26:57-64, Acts 6:8-15

Part 9 in Acts series



**Outline: Intro.** Too Comfortable – Time for action

Stephen shakes things up.

False witnesses – distorting the truth.

Stephens Countenance - Moses & Jesus

False and True witnesses.

What of us? 2 Cor 3:18

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as we continue through the book of Acts, may we find within it principles and truths that we can apply to our own time and circumstances. This we ask that we might witness to you, the true and living Lord, amen.

Last weeks passage ended on something of a high, Ch 6:7, "The word of God continued to spread. The number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many priests became obedient to the faith."

The Word of God, the gospel, is bearing fruit. Believers are now described as disciples. Temple priests are turning to Christ. A great many of them. Maybe some of these same priests had been involved in the persecution directed at the Apostles, in an effort to stop the Word of God having its effect.

So far through Acts we have seen that nothing has been able to stop the advance of the Gospel, certainly not persecution. Ironically it is a lack of persecution that slows things down. At Ch 6, remember, we are maybe 2-3 years beyond Pentecost and the church is still centred in Jerusalem. It will need a prod if it is to fulfil the mandate Jesus gave. That believers would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth.

Is it possible to be a comfortable witness? Many folk don't know that the word witness and martyr are interchangeable. The witness is one who as it were, gives up their life to live for Jesus. The martyr does that literally.

Vs 7 a great many priests became obedient to the faith. Jewish followers of God have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Saviour. I think a religious Jew turning to Christ must be such a wonderfully rich thing given their knowledge of the OT.

There will be a backlash because people seeing priests getting converted will have an effect. Then and now.

There is the story a Anglican clergyman, Rev. William Haslam, who got converted by his own sermon in 1851.

He was preaching from Matt 22:42, where Jesus was asking the Pharisees "what think you of Christ" and his conscience was suddenly struck that he had only "head knowledge" and did not truly believe either. A sudden wave of light and joy fill his soul, and he continued speaking with a transformed demeanor.

A local Methodist preacher in the pews recognized the shift, stood up, and shouted, "*The parson is converted!*", the result. Apparently 20 people were converted in the congregation and as this event became known there was a massive local revival.

There are regrettably congregations that have to suffer unconverted clergy. What a great witness it would if the truth and power of gospel converted them. Even as they spoke words that they did not believe.

Says the Apostle Paul in the first ch of Romans. "I am not ashamed of the gospel." "It" the Gospel, is the power of God for salvation for all who believe". For Rev William Haslam it was the power of God for salvation even when he didn't believe. It was the power of the gospel brought him to belief.

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, it is the power of God for salvation." That was the first passage I preached on in my first parish some 30 years ago. I hope it is clear I hold the same conviction today.

“a great number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Notice, it’s not just they came to belief in some academic sense. They became obedient to it. They lived it.

“The parson is converted”. There will be a backlash by the religious leaders who were not obedient to the faith. Vs 8 Stephen is arrested. Stephen is the first non Apostle to be arrested. He will be the first martyr in the church. A man full of grace and wisdom. A man working in the power of God. A man able to powerfully proclaim the Gospel, and refute falsehood.

Stephen is arrested and various ones are set against Stephen, vs 9, We haven’t got time to look into the background of these particular characters, just the way they try to oppose the gospel.

Vs 9, they argued with Stephen vs 10, they could not withstand the wisdom of Stephen. Stephen shows the truth of Jesus words. “Don’t worry when they haul you before councils and various ones.” “Don’t worry about what to say.” “The Holy Spirit will give you the words”.

Lest we think the Holy Spirit is a bit like Ai doing all the work for us. It might be more helpful to say the HS will enable us to rightly draw on God’s word in a way that is appropriate for the situation.

To look at Stephens defence of the Gospel before the council it is clear he could both refute the false witnesses, and challenge the religious leaders distorted understanding of the OT.

Distorted because they could not see Christ in it. “What do you think of the Messiah” Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matt 22. Jesus was trying to get them to understand that the one spoken of in Psalm 110 was him.

Back to Stephen. What we see is something of a replay of what happened to Jesus at his trial. Verse 11 then they secretly instigated men to say “we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” It was a lie. But it was a lie that took the form of twisting and misinterpreting the truth.

Vs 12-14 “This man never stopped saying things against this holy place and the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and change the customs at Moses handed onto us.”

Jesus didn’t do away with the Law. He fulfilled it. Jesus did say the temple would be destroyed. But if those false witnesses were still around in AD 70 they would have seen that it was not Jesus who destroyed the Temple, it was the Romans.

False witnesses were set against Stephen as they had been set against Jesus. Opposition so often comes in the form of twisting and distorting of the Truth.

Jesus called the enemy, “the father of lies”. He said “when he lies he’s using his own natural language.” Think back to the garden and the distorting of the truth. “You will not surely die.” “You will be like God knowing good and evil.” The Gospel tells us there is only one way to be like God. By being transformed into the image of Jesus, by the power of the Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Opposition so often comes in the form of twisting and distorting the truth. Think on this. The Gospels teach us the truth about Jesus. Who he is. Why he came. What that means. Much of what we find following the Gospels, is a defence of that truth. It’s a countering of false and distorted teaching. It given to us so we don’t get sidetracked or shipwrecked in our faith.

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free said Jesus.” “If any preach a gospel other than the one that you have received, let that one be accursed” said the Apostle Paul.

The Russian dissident writer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, chronicled the events of the Stalinist purges in many novels. He wrote this “One word of truth will outweigh the whole world.”

Now while popularised by Solzhenitsyn, the phrase originates from an old Russian folk proverb that points towards moral and spiritual resilience. It is to say that no matter the power and force coming against the truth, truth will win. That is especially so when the truth is the truth of Jesus.

I want to focus for a bit on vs 15, Stephen is on trial for his life, being accused of blasphemy, of speaking against the law and the temple.

What of Stephen’s, demeanour, his countenance. Vs 15, “and all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

Our faith is not just a matter of words. Someone could know all the words in the bible but not know the Jesus. Stephen was standing before ones that knew the written word. But they did not know the living Word, the Lord Jesus. Stephen knew both. “and all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

In the old Testament in Exodus 34: when Moses came down from Mt Saini, having met with God and having the Law on a second set of tablets, we are told that Moses face was shinning. His face showed he had been in the presence of God.

Stephen is being falsely accused of speaking against the Law and yet Stephen is looking somewhat like Moses who came from the presence of God with the Law of God.

We are told that Moses covered his face with a veil lest the people draw back in fear. Further, that every time Moses goes into the tent of meeting and into the presence of God, he takes off the veil and then puts it on when he leaves. Why. Because it was a fading glory.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul makes a link between the fading glory on Moses face with the fading glory, of the first Covent. Fading that is in comparison to a greater glory that will be seen in the person and work of Jesus.

The Law is indeed good and useful and as instructor and guide. We meditate upon it. We draw on it. But we do knowing that the law is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. That one who fulfills the law for us when we turn to him in repentance and faith.

Stephen in our passage today is so connected to Jesus that it shows. “and all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

For ourselves to close. What of us when we face difficult circumstances. It can be a time for us to shine. But not just difficult circumstances.

The apostle Paul draws a line between what happened to Moses whenever he was in the presence of God, and us as believers in Jesus. 2 Cor 3:18, and all of us, who with unveiled faces, seeing the glory the Lord is though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit

Moses glory faded. Ours, according to the Apostle Paul does the opposite. Is that not a rather awesome thought?

- It is challenging in the standard it sets.
- It is encouraging in the potential it holds before us.

I think I've shared before one of the very powerful experiences and encouragement I sometimes witnessed as a prison chaplain. Seeing a monstrous sized fellow, rippling with muscles, tattoos covering most of their face. The kind of character that no doubt could snap me like a twig.

And yet to see in their eyes something of the presence of Jesus. A face black with tattoos and yet eyes that sparkled with life and showed the reality and the transformation that Jesus can bring into any life.

On a couple occasions, and not in the prison context, I have seen the opposite. Someone so controlled by anger and rage that their face was purple, bordering on black. I suspect at that moment the enemy was somewhat in control.

“And we who with unveiled faces, seeing the glory the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit”

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem Samaria and the ends of the Earth. So what is a true witness? One who clearly and faithfully speaks the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And yes, certainly our words are not to be undermined by our actions.

What is a false witness. One who denies or distorts the truth.

- Are there false witnesses who hold positions of power and status in the church?
- Are there false witnesses who proclaim from the pulpit it really does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere?
- Are there false witnesses who proclaim that you can live as you like if you put it under the category of love?
- Are there false witnesses who say you can even call holy what God says is a sin. For that is what you are doing when you bless something.

To finish. As Stephen faced pressure it was clear he was not alone. He was looking a bit like the one he was serving.

What of us? As we see Jesus. And we do that primarily through the Gospel, we become like him.

It's not just for our benefit. Stephen was not worried about himself. His priority was to faithfully witness to Jesus whatever the cost. The church is about to take a massive step forward. In Stephen we will see for the first time in this growing church that for some the witnessing and martyrdom are very strongly linked.

More next week. Let's pray,