

Jesus said, "If you deny me before men, I will deny you before my Father in heaven." Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe." Peter said, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have." If we have received God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life, we must stand upon the convictions of our faith, no matter what the consequences. If we hide the word of God in our hearts, and seek to grow in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, we must stand upon the truth, no matter what the opposition.

Our stands define us. They help to solidify our faith. The bible promises to reward those who are faithful, but we do not stand for personal gain. We stand as the representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. We stand so that the lost world might receive a warning about the things to come, and have an opportunity to turn to Christ in faith, so that they might be saved.

When we read of the atrocities across the world, the beheading of Christians who refuse to denounce their faith, the coordinated attacks against innocent people in Paris, the downing of airlines by Islamic fundamentalists, we have to wonder what lies ahead for us. Will such persecution come to our shores? Will we be able to stand upon our faith in the face of death? If we are unwilling to stand when there is no physical threat, how will we find the courage to take our stand when our lives are on the line?

In tonight's passage, Luke records the account of Stephen's stoning. I pray that none of us ever have to face a martyr's death, but we gain insight on how to take our stand, regardless of the circumstances, in this passage of scripture. Please read along with me, Acts 7:54-8:1.

This passage begins with a statement about how enraged the religious leaders were at Stephen's words. Rather than receiving conviction over their sin, repenting, and trusting Jesus as their Savior and Lord, they gnashed their teeth at him, which was an expression of total contempt. They were angry because of what Stephen's words, and the gospel message, implied. God has replaced the Old Covenant with a New Covenant. Israel was guilty of killing God's Son, their Messiah. They had lost their most favored status. The requirement for strict observance of the Law was a temporary, and had been replaced by God's grace. This meant that temple worship would no longer be required, and the Sadducees would lose their position, power, prestige, and wealth.

Before we get carried away in judgment against the religious leaders, how would we respond today if someone came into our church and decried our beliefs, and religious traditions? Hopefully we would stand upon our convictions, and denounce the attacker. We would take our stand upon what we believe to be true, based upon the word of God. It seems to me that this was the position of the religious leaders. The problem was that Stephen was right, and they were wrong. They were too set in their traditions. They had allowed man-made laws to carry more authority than the word of God.

The church today is so divided into factions that I fear we have become only a shadow of the body of Christ. The worship of Mary, man-made proclamations, dietary laws, all sorts of requirements and prohibitions that have nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ have divided the church for centuries. It seems that we have become more enthusiastic in our stand against the beliefs of brothers and sisters in Christ, than we are willing to take a stand on the clear teachings of God's word, and the gospel, in an unbelieving world. Maybe that is because

we do not fear retaliation from the light of those who profess Christ, but tremble at the thought of facing the darkness of this world.

Stephen stood upon the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. He kept the main thing the main thing. He spoke the truth with great conviction, and did not back down in the face of the worst possible opposition.

We too must take our stand, but we need to choose our battles wisely. If you know me, you know that I am passionate about the doctrines of our faith. With all that is within me, I want to preach, and teach, the contextual word of God, and stand upon that truth. But as I preach the word, it is primarily for the edification of the people of the church. I speak biblical truth with the support, and encouragement, of brothers and sisters in Christ, with little or no opposition.

If I speak about the truth of biblical tongues, I help to build up the body in a contextual understanding of God's word, but I have no interest in picking a fight with a brother or sister in Christ who has a different understanding, or practice. We are not at war with other believers. We are at war with the spiritual forces of evil in this dark world, with the eternal souls of the lost at stake.

Jesus commands us to be the light of the world, and to shine that light into the darkness. I will probably not face much real opposition from someone I disagree with, who has the love of Christ in them, over some issue of theology, but I should expect to face the opposition from the powers of darkness when I stand upon the truth of God's word in a lost world.

When I say abortion on demand is godless, when I speak against homosexuality, adultery, and fornication, when I say that Islam is a godless false religion and the spirit of anti-Christ, when I speak out against the sins of the world, and the godless actions of governments, I should expect some opposition, for these are the battles upon which we must take our stand, if we hope to make a difference in the world.

We have to remember, however, that while we take our stands to hold back the darkness, the greater goal is to reach the world with the gospel, and love of Christ. We have to stand, but we will fall if we get off balance. We stand without compromise, but we stand in the love of Christ. How do we do that? As Stephen took his stand, the bible says that he was full of the Holy Spirit.

We cannot stand effectively in our own strength. We cannot afford to become proud. The good news is that we do not have to stand alone, nor are we supposed to. The only way we can be effective, and productive, is to stand in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us discernment to know how, and when, to take our stand. The Holy Spirit will bring to our memories, and our lips, the word of God, so that we know what to say. The Holy Spirit will protect us and defend us, and if it is God's will that we honor Him with our the sacrifice of our lives, the Holy Spirit will encourage us, and give us the strength to stand until the very end.

Not only was Stephen filled with the Holy Spirit, as he faced certain death because of his stand for Christ, he envisioned, and received the promise of his faith. He gazed into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father. Then he testified about what he knew was in store for him.

For the born again believer, God has removed the sting of death, through the cross of Jesus Christ, and His resurrection from the dead. Nobody should desire to surrender his or her life prematurely. I want to live, and live life to the fullest, so long as I can be of some service to my Lord, and until the day that He says that it is time for me to come home. But, I am not afraid to die. If by my stand upon the gospel the opponents of Christ require my life, I know what is on

the other side, and I welcome it. If the worst thing that could happen to me is that I get to go and live with Jesus forever, I am ready to go.

Not only did Stephen envision the prize that lay before him, he kept his eyes on Jesus and followed his example. Notice that at the very end, he spoke the words Jesus spoke. Stephen used the words, "Son of Man," to describe his vision, and it is the only time in the New Testament where we find these words when Jesus did not speak them. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, and Stephen saw it. Stephen faced all the elements that Jesus faced at His trial. Stephen faced the same accusers. He was stoned for the same reasons that they crucified Jesus, and he prayed Jesus' prayer, "receive my Spirit, and "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

Jesus said, "If you want to be my disciple, you must take up your cross daily and follow me." The cross of Christ is the symbol of sacrifice as well as forgiveness. As born again believers we sometimes have to sacrifice in order to take our stand. We sacrifice our peace of mind and confidence if we have to step outside of our comfort zone. We sacrifice our pride when we face ridicule because of our stand. Some people sacrifice their jobs, or their hopes for promotion. Some sacrifice their physical safety, or even their lives for their stand.

Stephen's opponents were outraged. The charge against him was blasphemy, and without legal procedures, they carried Stephen outside of town, and stoned him to death, where the bible says, he fell asleep. The biblical idea of falling asleep is not the same as death for a lost person. For the lost, death is mysterious, fearful, and unknown. It is a time of eternal separation from God, and receiving the judgment deserved because of sin. For the child of God, death is like falling asleep, and then waking up in the presence of God.

Paul later writes, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Jesus told the thief on the cross, "This day you will be with me in paradise." At the end of his life, Paul told Timothy, "I have fought the fight, I have run the race, and now there is a prize in store for me." God has promised rewards for those who stand upon His truth, and He will say, "Well done my good and faithful servant, come and enter into your Father's rest."

I mentioned last time that Stephen's death served God's purposes. At this point great persecution came against the church, and people were scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, and then throughout the known world. Everywhere they went, they told others about all that had happened, and the gospel spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire.

We see another part of God's plan being revealed by the introduction of a man named Saul. After his Damascus Road experience, Saul becomes know as Paul. He becomes the primary instrument of God to reach the gentile world with the gospel, and the focus of much of the book of Acts. The Lord used Saul in the spread of the gospel through persecution of the church, and then as an Apostle, He used Paul in the physical and spiritual growth of the body of Christ. He radically changed Paul's life so that he had a powerful testimony and ministry. God used Paul to give us half of the inspired scriptures in the New Testament. Paul becomes a biblical example for us in sharing our faith, and sacrificing for our stands. Like Stephen, Paul became a Christian martyr for refusing to compromise on the truth of God's word, and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Taking our stand requires unnatural courage. We find that courage through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit that indwells every born again believer. The idea of taking our stand may scare us to death, but greater is He that is in me, than he that is in the world. Standing upon God's word, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, then boils down to a matter of faith. How much do I believe what God says in His word? Do I really trust in His promises? Do I really believe that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that He died for my sins? Do I believe that He

provided victory over sins and death by His resurrection from the grave? Do I believe that God will deliver on His promise of eternal life? Do I believe that the Lord has a plan, and purpose for my life? Do I believe that in order to fulfill that purpose I must take my stand?

What the world needs is men and women of faith who are willing to stand upon the truth of God's word, no matter what the cost, or the opposition we may have to face in the days ahead. If we are in the last days, it is only going to get worse. If we are not in the last days, the darkness is still overwhelming, and the lost world needs Jesus, and the forgiveness, and grace, that comes through faith in Him. If there is anyone here who has not bowed his or her knee in faith to the lord Jesus Christ, I pray that you will receive Him into your heart, right now, as Savior and Lord.