

Acts 7:1-4a, 20, 37-39, 44-8:1

¹ Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

² To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'^[a]

⁴ "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.

²⁰ "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.^[c] For three months he was cared for in his father's house.

³⁷ "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'^[h] ³⁸ He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

³⁹ "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

⁴⁴ "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.^[k] ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

⁴⁹ "'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?

⁵⁰ Has not my hand made all these things?'^[l]

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 8

¹ And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

The Church Persecuted and Scattered

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.



Introduction.

New Year's is a time for making resolutions – lose a few pounds, get out of debt, establish a new routine. I've set a goal to lose 11 pounds in 2011. We'll see how I do.

I came across a cartoon of a husband and wife talking about New Year's Resolutions. The husband says, "My New Year's Resolution is to stop telling you what to do all the time." Then he adds, "Here, I wrote down your resolutions for you."

One of the reasons people think about New Year's Resolutions is we aren't happy with our lives as they currently are, and we know we need to do better. It is a time for us to look back and look forward. We look back over the past year and think about some changes that need to be made, and we look forward and begin to envision how what our lives would be like if we lived a different way.

A question I would like to ask you in this season of making resolutions is, "What are you living for?" What is it that gets you up and out of the bed every morning? What motivates you and fills your heart with passion in life? What have you been living for this past year, and in 2011 what does the Lord want you to be living for in the future?

This morning we read of a man named Stephen who had great clarity on what he was living for, and, just as importantly, what he was willing to die for. We read about it in Acts 7.

I. The Speech of Stephen.

Previously in our study of the book of Acts, we learned that a problem developed in the early church regarding the care for Greek-speaking widows, and several people were appointed as deacons, or ministers of mercy, to help address the crisis. Stephen was one of these early deacons, and the Bible tells us that in addition to being a great deacon he was used of God to perform great miracles among the people. We also see in the text he was a great evangelist.

However, opposition to Stephen arose from a group of people who were involved in what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, and they circulated a rumor that Stephen had done something which offended pious Jews. They said he blasphemed against God in what he said about the temple and in what he said about the Old Testament law. For the Jews, to speak against either one of these was to speak against God Himself, because the Jewish law was regarded as God's Word and the Jewish temple was regarded as God's house. So Stephen was arrested, and he was brought before the Sanhedrin to answer the charges.

In the speech that followed in chapter 7, we see a panorama of the history of God's dealings with the people of Israel. Stephen traced the work of God in the Old Testament beginning with Abraham and followed it all the way through the construction of the temple. He picked out four main periods of Israel's history which were dominated by four main characters. First, he highlighted Abraham and the patriarchal age. Next he talked about Joseph and the Egyptian exile. Then he discussed Moses, the Exodus, and the wanderings in the wilderness. Finally, he mentioned David and Solomon, the establishment of the monarchy, and the building of the temple in 1000 BC.

The connecting feature of these four eras of biblical history is that in none of them was God's presence limited to any one particular place. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament was a living God, He was a God on the move who called His people to join Him on an adventure of faith, and He always accompanied them wherever they went. Stephen appears to be one of the first Christians to clearly understand that God could never be contained in any building, and he also understood that the patterns of the Old Covenant were passing away. God was not a god who lived in buildings made by the hands of men. Heaven is His throne, and the earth is His footstool, as he quoted from the psalms.

At this point, Stephen turned the tables on his judges, and he said that it was they, not he, who showed a disregard for the law. Stephen the accused became the accuser, and he said that the members of the Sanhedrin were guilty of the same sin as their Jewish forefathers who also resisted the Lord and His holy prophets down through the centuries. He took them to task for what he termed their betrayal and murder of the Son of God.

I don't think Stephen ever took a Dale Carnegie course on "How to win friends and influence people." He was not concerned with popularity and acceptance. His aim was to speak the truth, and it got him into hot water. Ultimately, it got him killed.



II. The Death of Stephen.

The text tells us that at the end of his message Stephen had a vision of the risen Christ standing at the right hand of the Father. Unwilling to listen any longer, members of the Sanhedrin covered their ears and they tried to drown out his words by yelling aloud. They were determined to silence him, so they rushed Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and began to hurl stones in an attempt to kill him.

Since the Romans had taken away the Jew's right of capital punishment, it appears that the stoning of Stephen was more a mob lynching than an official execution. As Stephen died, he cried out and said two things, and both were prayers. Both were reminiscent of the words Jesus Himself spoke from the cross when He was crucified. Stephen said, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" Then he added, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*"

Luke tells us that as Stephen's body was crushed by the rocks, he fell asleep, a euphemism for his death. The deacon's martyrdom was the precursor to a great persecution which led to the scattering of the disciples throughout Judea and Samaria. The church was shaken by the death of Stephen, but in hindsight we can see how God used it to help fulfill the Great Commission.

Until then, the early church remained in Jerusalem. It was only after Stephen's death that the disciples were forced to go to the surrounding areas, which were the next places to which Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 28 to take the message of God's love. It was time for the church to get going, and the Lord used this new wave of opposition to move the early church out of the nest and to carry out His mission to the ends of the earth.

III. An Example of Faithfulness.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr, but he wasn't the last. Throughout the centuries people have been willing to pay with their blood for their allegiance to Christ. They sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel, and they are examples of faithfulness which serve to remind us that there are some things in life that are not only worth living for, they are also worth dying for.

There comes a time in our lives as Christians when we must go against the crowd, when we must speak the truth even when it is hard. We may be called upon to take an unpopular stand, and it may result in rejection. Continuing in our faith even when it costs us, holding fast to our beliefs regardless of the consequences, is the call of every faithful follower of Christ.

In his radio program *Breakpoint* several years ago, Chuck Colson said, "It was a test all of us would hope to pass, but none of us really wants to take. A masked gunman points his weapon at a Christian and asks 'Do you believe in God?' She knows that if she says 'yes,' she'll pay with her life. But unfaithfulness to her Lord is unthinkable. So, with what would be her last words, she calmly answered 'yes, I believe in God.'"

What makes this story remarkable is that the gunman was no communist thug, nor was the martyr a Chinese pastor. The event I'm describing took place in Littleton, Colorado, at Columbine High School in 1999. Our family lived in Boulder at the time, and the events are still emblazoned on my memory.

The Washington Post reported that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two students who shot 13 people, did not choose their victims at random – they were acting out of a kaleidoscope of prejudice. Media coverage centered on the killers' hostility toward racial minorities and athletes, but there was another group the pair hated every bit as much – Christians. According to some accounts, eight Christians – four Evangelicals and four Catholics – were killed.

Among them was Cassie Bernall. She was a 17-year-old junior with long blond hair, hair she wanted to cut off and have made into wigs for cancer patients who had lost their hair through chemotherapy. She was active in her youth group at Westpool's Community Church, and she was known for carrying a Bible to school.

Cassie was in the school library reading her Bible when the two young killers burst in. According to witnesses, one of the killers pointed his gun at Cassie and asked, "Do you believe in God?"

Cassie paused and then answered, "Yes, I believe in God."

"Why?" he asked.

Cassie did not have a chance to respond; the gunman had already shot her dead. As her classmate Mickie Cain told Larry King on CNN, "She completely stood up for God. When the killers asked her if there was anyone who had faith in Christ, she spoke up and they shot her for it."



Cassie's martyrdom was even more remarkable when you consider that just a few years before she had dabbled in the occult, including witchcraft. She had embraced the same darkness and nihilism that drove her killers to such evil acts. But in 1997, Cassie dedicated her life to Christ and it turned her life around. Her friend Craig Moon called her a "light for Christ."

According to the Boston Globe, on the night of her death, Cassie's brother Chris found a poem she had written just two days prior to her death. It read:

"Now I have given up on everything else
I have found it to be the only way
To really know Christ and to experience
The mighty power that brought
Him back to life again, and to find
Out what it means to suffer and to
Die with him. So, whatever it takes
I will be one who lives in the fresh
Newness of life of those who are
Alive from the dead."ⁱ

Conclusion.

As we close this morning, and as we begin 2011, I ask you again, "What are you living for?" Think about it. Are you living for your family? Your job? Your grandkids? Your school? Your future? Your Savior? What are you really living for? If Stephen had been asked that question, what would his answer have been, and how does your answer compare to his?

The second question I want to ask is just as important. What are you willing to die for? Your loved ones? Your country? Your friends? Your Lord? What are you really willing to die for? If you were in Stephen's shoes – if you were in Cassie's shoes – what would you have done?

This is a hard passage of Scripture which ends on a very somber note. Someone suggested to me it's perhaps not the most positive note on which to begin a new year. However, there is something in this passage which does provide hope and encouragement. In the midst of the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, Saul of Tarsus, who later on became Paul, is introduced to us for the first time. He was there at Stephen's death, and the text tells us he watched everyone's coats during the stoning of Stephen and gave approval for what was being done.

The end of the story of Stephen was the beginning of the story of Paul, and later in his life the apostle would refer to this incident as one of the things God used to lead Paul to the Lord. All of our stories tie together, and our stories are wrapped into God's larger story of love. The end of one story is the beginning of another, and God isn't finished writing His story for your life regardless of how things may appear this morning.

We turned a page on the calendar yesterday. It is the end of one year and the beginning of the next. How will your story be written in 2011? What adventure lies around the corner for you? How does God want to make a difference in your life, and where will He take you? A lot depends on what you decide you are living for and what, if necessary, you are even willing to die for. May the Lord guide and bless each of us in this new year as we follow Christ together.

Now, that's a resolution worth making in 2011. Amen.

ⁱ Chuck Colson, "Modern Day Martyr", broadcast on "Breakpoint", April 26, 1999.

