

Christ Community Covenant Church

Famous Last Words: Stephen – “Lord do not hold this sin against them”

Pastor Dave Scherrer - August 17, 2014

Review

Famous Last Words: Joshua, giving God all the glory

God Hunt – Watching for God moments and then giving God all the glory

It is significant that the famous last words of prophets both ancient and modern inevitably point us to Christ. So far in our famous last words series we have seen that to be true for Abraham, Moses and Joshua. This morning we will fast forward to the first century to meet another who is not considered a prophet, but none the less pointed us to Jesus Christ. We will look at the famous last words of the first deacon of the church and the first martyr of the church, Stephen.

Stephen - the Death of a Spirit-Filled Man

Stephen is a fascinating character, as we will learn. His life and ministry only encompass 2 chapters in the Bible so that would contribute to his not being perhaps so famous. But his life has inspired many through the years in art, music, poetry and literature.



The Stoning of Saint Stephen is the first painting by Dutch artist Rembrandt, painted in 1625 at the age of 19. It is currently kept in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. Imbedded in the artwork perhaps lost on us is a self portrait as one of the onlookers and also the solitary figure of Saul with coats at his feet.



"The Martyrdom of St. Stephen 1603-04" oil on Canvas, now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

One of the things that set Stephen aside as one of the early deacons of the early church is the description of him as full of faith and power and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 6:5, 8

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of **faith and of the Holy Spirit**

⁸ And Stephen, full of **grace and power**, was doing great wonders and signs among the people

What exactly does “Spirit Filled” mean? (Discussion)

The message of the Gospel brings the power of God into every believer's life through the person and work of the Lord Jesus and the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us so!

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is *God's power* for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 24

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is *the power of God*.²⁴ But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

My conversation and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a *demonstration of the Spirit and of power*,⁵ so that your faith would not be based on human wisdom but on the power of God.

It seems to me that far too many Christians, however, are not experiencing the enabling power of God. In our attempt to rationalize, we may seek to find comfort in thoughts such as: "No one is perfect, we all have our weaknesses," or "I am doing the very best I can, and I am sure God understands." Of course, no one is perfect, and certainly God does understand. Let's assume we are doing our best, but this does not alter the fact that unless we are walking by faith in God and in His abundant resources in Christ, we are missing the abundant life Christ offered when He said, "I have come so that they may have life, and may have *it* abundantly" (John 10:10b).

Is *our best* what God wants? No! He wants faith in *His best*, the Lord Jesus, and in the person of the Spirit whom God has sent to indwell us and empower us so we can experience the power of Christ and the ability to do our best, *not in our own strength, but in the strength which God supplies*.²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Colossians 1:29).

So let's get back to the story, and we pick up where Stephen has been preaching about Jesus and many Jews were finding his words confusing and offensive to their understanding of the Temple and the laws of Moses.

Acts 6:12-15

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

[Stephen as a kind of savior:

Before Caiaphas and Sanhedrin

False witnesses

Destruction of the temple, loud cry, committal of spirit, forgiveness of his persecutors]

After a long sermon and defense of his faith before the Sanhedrin, Stephen closes with these words that seem to pick a fight:

Acts 7:51-60

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors 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 given through angels but have not obeyed it.”
⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin 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 coats 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.

Bold Words of Truth

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.” Stephen was telling a bold truth to these very powerful religious leaders.

Bold Truth

For us here at 4Cs, we have stated that one of our firm values is that we hold to a bold truth. That means being clear and confident in the essentials of our faith. It means declaring the centrality of the word of God, the necessity of the new birth and understanding the Church as a fellowship of believers, and having a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. It means, as Paul put it, preaching Christ crucified. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected living Lord and Savior – one with the Father and the Holy Spirit and the only salvation for helpless humanities lost condition of the soul. But the Sadducees would not hear it:

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him (v57). It’s like this I guess . . .

Telling the truth about Christ seems to either put people over the edge or captures their imagination and fills them with hope. There is no middle ground with Jesus.

John 15:18-25

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

But being bold of truth was not all that distinguished Stephen. He was also a man who could appeal to the grace of God for those who were persecuting him. He offered a prayer of abounding grace.

A Request of Abounding Grace

Acts 7:59-60

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.

The reality is that grace is sometimes the boldest truth. Sometimes truth is the greatest grace because it is truth that sets us free.

[Truth and the lives of our children or spouse]

Simply smiling and saying it's going to be ok is not grace! Turning your face against abuse or lying or cheating does not help the person grow in Christ.

Jesus Christ and the Death of Death

While we are avoiding any simplistic, naïve, romantic images of death, let us believe with all our hearts and all our minds and all our might the great truth of our Christian faith – Jesus by his victory on the cross has put death to death. Paul was able to write when thinking about the passage from Isaiah 28:

1 Corinthians 15:55-57

⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?"

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

But not only the victory, but so much more than victory.

Romans 8:35-39

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;

we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are more than conquerors over death through Christ. God gives us the victory over death. But more than victory. Death is defeated by Jesus. Death is bound in the chains of resurrection power so that he cannot destroy us. But more than that. More than that!

Death is handed over, bound and defeated, as a servant to the church. We are more than conquerors because death is not just defeated and kept from destroying us; ***it is enslaved and made the servant of God's people***. Death is now a gift to us – a doorway to an intimate fellowship with the Savior.

This is the meaning of 1 Corinthians 3:21–23, "Let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's." Death is yours the way you are Christ's. And you are Christ's to serve him and glorify him. So death is your servant. The enemy is defeated, bound, enslaved, and delivered into the service of the saints.

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

What if Stephen's sermon only reached one man – and what if that man's name was Saul?