

A Matter of Life and Death Part 1

By Mary Kane

One gusty day in early August, my husband and I went to Grand Mere Beach on Lake Michigan. Since it was a windy day we were looking forward to the large waves that were sure to be crashing upon the beach. We were not disappointed. Large rollers raced in and broke at our feet as we strolled along the windy beachfront. Despite the wind and the waves, my husband and I observed a number of small children playing and swimming in the lake. Although it was a "red flag day" which meant "no swimming" parents chose to ignore the warnings and allowed their children swim in the treacherous waters anyway. Lake Michigan is known for its dangerous undertow and every year people disregard the warnings and drown.

We later learned that while we were at the beach, a little boy became separated from his father in the treacherous waters. While the father frantically searched for his son, the little boy, not realizing that he was in trouble, continued to play and splash in the waves. The boy grew tired and tried to return to shore, but it was too late; the waves were too strong for him. The boy was in trouble. Thankfully, a good Samaritan noticed the child struggling and pulled him to safety.

God used this incident to teach me a few valuable lessons. First, all around us are lost people who do not comprehend that they are in danger. Like the little boy, they continue to laugh and play not even realizing they are in treacherous waters. They seem happy and content but all the while are dangerously close to spending an eternity in hell. These people will often try to assure others that they are content and at peace when all the while they are dying inside for lack of a Savior. Like the little boy, they can do nothing to save themselves. Without the help of a Savior, they too will perish. Second, for those of us who are saved, we need to realize that God could call us home this very day and this very hour. Are we ready? Have we lived our lives in such a way that we will hear the words, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

Before we begin our study for today, please take a moment to go before your Father in heaven and ask Him to forgive you of any sin that is on your heart. Now ask Him to fill you with the Holy Spirit and give you insight into His Holy Word.

Now please read Acts 6:8-7:60 (Our text for today is a little longer than usual in order to lay a foundation for our study, but please persevere and read it to the end).

Write a description of Stephen according to verses Acts 6:8-10.

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to minister to the Greek speaking Jews in the church in Jerusalem. In particular, he was chosen to distribute food to the widows in the Church. He was also known for performing miraculous works. As a man of great faith, Stephen was able to work incredible signs and wonders among the people. He was also very wise and Spirit-filled. Because of his great faith, Stephen had several enemies.

Who were these enemies and what were they trying to do to Stephen?

Stephen's enemies were members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (former slaves) who stirred up false witnesses against Stephen. They accused him of blasphemy. Blasphemy was a very serious sin. Leviticus 24:11, 16 state that the penalty for blasphemy against God is stoning.

What remarkable statement is made about Stephen in verse 15?

The NKJV states that "Stephens face was as the face of an angel." Most of my commentaries agree that this means one of three things: Stephen was peaceful concerning the outcome of this trial regardless of the verdict; his face was illuminated because he was often in the presence of God (reflected glory); or his shining face was a reference to Moses. My personal belief is that Stephens face "shined" because he was so often in the presence of the Lord.

Do you know someone who seems to shine with the fullness of Christ?

Why do you think causes that person shines the light of Christ?

Glance over our text again please.

In general, what does Stephen describe in Acts 7:1-50?

He recounts the history of the Jewish people, leading up to the sacrifice of Jesus. After recounting the chronicles of the Jewish people, Stephen suddenly ends the history lesson and the *accused* becomes the *accuser* (verses 51-53). Even though facing a death sentence, Stephen does not try to defend himself, refute the claims of the elders and scribes or appease his accusers; instead he confronts his accusers concerning the crucifixion of Christ and their failure to recognize Him as Savior despite their vast knowledge of the Scriptures. Remarkably, Stephen is more concerned about the glory of God than his own life.

What is the reaction of the elders and the scribes to Stephen's accusation?

Verse 54 says that they were "cut to the heart" and "gnashed their teeth at him." God's Word, a double-edged sword, cut through their excuses, jealousies and sins and exposed the evil in their hearts. The elders and scribes were not truly seeking God; they were seeking glory for themselves. They literally wished to *chew up* Stephen and spit him out. Like the elders and the scribes, when we are confronted with the truth we will either see our sin, repent and ask for forgiveness or lash out in anger at our confronter. Let this be warning to us, may we not miss Jesus because of prideful knowledge concerning the things of God.

Now please read verses 55 and 56.

Who was with Stephen while he was on trial for his life?

Jesus was. Moments before his death, Jesus granted Stephen supernatural sight—he saw Jesus standing by God the Father. Because of this vision, Stephen did not focus on the rocks, the hurt, or the crowd; all he saw was Jesus. One glimpse of his Savior and Stephen left behind the pain and shame of a public stoning. Every rock that was thrown brought Stephen one step closer to eternity with his glorious Lord. For this saint, the fear of death was swallowed up by the presence of Christ. This hardship in Stephen’s life was not a sign that God had deserted Stephen—quite the contrary. During this trial God was drawing closer to him. Like Stephen, we too will be able to endure horrible persecution because God will grant us a greater measure of His Presence during our times of suffering.

Recall a recent time of suffering. How did God faithfully see you through this season?

Please read Acts 7:56 again. Now please fill in the missing word from Acts 7:56:

“... ‘Look! I see the Son of Man _____ at the right hand of God!’”

Where does this verse place Jesus? He was *standing* at the right hand of God. Standing? Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 10:12 state that after Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross that He *sat down* at the right hand of God, where He has remained to make constant intercessions for the saints. Stephen’s sacrifice did not go unnoticed by our Savior. At the time of his death, Jesus paid a special honor to Stephen; He *stood up* to receive His faithful servant and welcome him home. While it is man’s desire to hoard his life, it is God’s desire that we generously pour it out like a drink offering at the feet of Jesus. The sacrifice of one’s life will not go without reward. God promises, “...whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Jesus honored Stephen’s sacrifice by standing to welcome him home.

Please read verse 59 again.

Describe Stephen’s attitude toward death.

He longed to leave this world to be with his Lord. I find it profound that Stephen asked not for Jesus to *deliver* him but to *receive* him. Because Stephen walked so closely with Jesus in life, he did not fear meeting Him in death. Over the years, I have met many Christians who have viewed death in the same manner as Stephen; they were not fearful or nervous about dying. Many of these people reported the same thing: they used to be afraid of death but lost that fear when they became a Christian. I cannot say that I have had the same experience. I was fearful of death before my salvation and have struggled with this same fear after salvation. Death has always seemed so ugly and terrifying... something to be feared and avoided as long as possible. One must strive against death; Eat healthy, exercise, don't smoke or drink and maybe one will be able to cheat death and live forever. But God's Word says, "What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave? Selah" Psalm 89:48. Do I really want to live forever in this body of flesh? When I was younger I could avoid dealing with the issue of death by refusing to think about it. But now, as I am many years older, death draws closer everyday and cannot be avoided. Eventually God brought me to a point where I had to deal with my fear. A few months ago I began to seek God's heart about the issue of death. I asked Him to change beliefs to line up with His beliefs. God has been faithful. Slowly but surely He's been transforming my heart. He has been teaching me that the Bible's views on death are very different than man's. Let's look at some of these truths on death from the Old Testament.

Please read 2 Kings 2:1-11.

Do you see any evidence that Elijah was fearful about the end of his life on earth?

Now please read Deuteronomy 32:48-52 and 34:1-7.

Do you see any evidence that Moses was fearful at the end of his life?

Who was with Moses when he died?

Most of us hope to be with our loved ones when we die. God called Moses to go up Mount Nebo and die alone. In my mind I imagine how hard it would be to know that you had to leave your family and friends behind to go and die. I don't think I'd be able to let a loved one walk away to go die somewhere alone. How hard it must have been for Moses family. But Moses was not alone. Scriptures tell us that he was speaking with God up to the point of death. As you just read in Deuteronomy 34, God personally buried Moses. Like Moses, God will be with us when we die. He has said in His Word, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." At the point of our conversion, our spirit was joined with His Spirit for eternity. He cannot be unfaithful to Himself. Even during our death, He will be with us, right by our side waiting to usher us into eternity with Him.

Some of my personal heroes are people who have faced death, yet continued to live abundantly. Bill Bright co-founder of Campus crusade for Christ, author, speaker and evangelist lived his life for Christ until he died from complications from pulmonary fibrosis at the age of 81. On a radio broadcast I heard his wife state that Bill's most productive literary period of his life was the year that he died. Mr. Bright did not believe that his usefulness to the Lord ended with a terminal diagnosis. He continued ministering, praying and writing up until his final days. Also, I have a dear friend who has been struggling with cancer for years. Her focus, however has not turned inward. She has not allowed herself to fall into a season of despair but continues to find ways to modify her life so she can love and serve her family, pray for others and continue her walk with the Lord. In death she continues to celebrate life.

As we have observed, Stephen, Elijah and Moses had deep and abiding relationships with God. Vibrant faith is the key to facing death with confidence and even joy. The closer we walk with Christ in life, the more peaceful we shall be concerning our life with Him in death. Even though we may not like to think about death, we still need to be prepared to face this stage of life. So what can we learn concerning death from these great men of the Bible?

- 1. Be filled with the Spirit.** God has not abandoned you. Every day of your life He has things to reveal to you about Himself and

the truth of His word. Deeply invest in your relationship with Him during every stage of life.

- 2. Act in the power of the Spirit.** You still have important vital work to do that will require the strength of the Lord. When you are weak, He is strong.

- 3. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you utterance.** Your influence as a Christian continues as long as you draw breath. Throughout your day you will have opportunities to share your faith and the love of Christ to all with whom you come into contact. Pray for God to bring you "divine appointments."

- 4. Like Stephen, speak the truth.** Continue to preach, teach and admonish no matter the opposition or hardship as long as He gives you speech or until He calls you home.

- 5. Trust in God.** Trust God over your feelings, your circumstances, your facts and your fears. As you have trusted Him in life, trust Him in death.

- 6. Keep calling out to God.** During the last minutes of his life Stephen continued to call out to God and he was blessed by a wonderful manifestation of God, the Father and Jesus. In sickness, in health, no matter what your circumstances seek Him in that season because He will reveal things to you that can only be found in that season.

- 7. Rest in His Presence and refuse fear.** Like Moses, Elijah and Stephen, God will be with you waiting to escort you and welcome you into eternity. God has promised in His Holy Word, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Which of the above points speaks to you the most and why?

In closing, please let me pray for you.

Dearest Holy Father,

I thank You that You created us and You know that we are dust. Despite our faults and failings You have promised to never leave us or forsake us. I thank you Father that by the life, death and resurrection of Your Son Jesus, You have destroyed death. I pray for my brother or sister in Christ right now. I ask that You would remove from them any fear they have concerning death that they might live fearlessly for You. In Jesus name I ask that you break the chains that fear has forged on the hearts of my brother or sister and that they be freed. I pray that they would bring any fear to You and ask You to begin the process of changing fear to faith. I ask Dearest Father that he or she might come to say and believe, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

In Jesus Holy Name,

Amen

Remember that God can use your death as powerfully as He can use your life. There is a purpose in death.

By Mary Kane

All rights reserved. Copyright 2012

www.onlybyprayer.com