

Acts 7:51-60 (NIV)

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.”
 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.

44-07-01-The Witness Stand

witness, martyr, testimony, truth, falsehood, persecution
 Acts 7:51-60

To take the witness stand for truth is to stand against falsehood.

INTRODUCTION:

–Stephen’s death gave us the word *martyrdom*, but he wasn’t the “*the 1st Christian martyr.*” *Martyr* [Grk, *martus*] means *witness*. Jesus used it in Acts 1:8, “...you will be my **witnesses**...” In today’s **text**, it’s used for the false “*witnesses*” who stood against Stephen and stoned him.
 –**HOM.idea.** Stephen took a stand against falsehood. *False witnesses* take theirs *against* the truth, and that’s why they stoned Stephen: they hated his ‘**witness stand**’ for truth. My **title**... because Jesus calls us to *stand up as His witnesses in life’s courtroom*. How did Stephen do this?

- I. Stephen Took a Stand Against the Ways of Falsehood– v.51a, 53.**
“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! ... you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”
- A. Stephen was concluding a long speech about *Israel’s history*: it turned the tables on his accusers by putting them on trial:
1. His verdict was an undeniable parallel (v.51b-52) “*You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 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—*”
 - B. But like the Mosaic Law, this *confrontation of wrong behavior* had no power to change people [**Warnings** may be good: “*Your driving’s reckless!*” “*You smoke too much... drink too much.*” “*You’re wasting water... electricity... money... your life!*”... but they have no power to transform lives!]
 1. Why has God never stopped confronting wrong behavior? It’s because *He made a way out of it* through His Son, Jesus Christ.
 2. This *council* boasted in the Law, but they had crucified the One who did have power to transform people. (By the Holy Spirit, Stephen told them the self-condemning truth about themselves.)

TRANS: *True witnesses stand for truth, even when it’s rejected.* Jesus said in John 3:19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. *Why shine light on those who keep resisting it? Because Jesus did! He never quit telling the truth to those who stood against it. He gives us, His witnesses, the same task.*

II. Stephen Was Not Alone in Taking His Stand for Truth— v.54-58,

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 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.

- A. That “council” was like a lynch mob—they had no legal right to kill a criminal, yet their hot, hellish anger drove them to it [I say *hellish* because “gnashing teeth” is used elsewhere in the NT only to describe *hell*.]
- B. In contrast, Stephen had royal backing: His King showed up, not to the *hellish* mob, but to His devoted servant on the witness stand.
1. Stephen saw Jesus not “seated at God’s right hand” but “standing” both to honor him and to join him in his witness stand for the truth.
 2. It was customary for judges to stand while pronouncing verdicts, and there were two cases before Christ as King and Judge:
 - a. the case of a bold witness who was about to hear the Judge say, “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter the joy of your Lord.”
 - b. and the case of a religious mob, whose *guilt* was displayed by removing their clothes to stone Stephen [before a stoning, the one sentenced was stripped naked. So, when the false “*witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of ... Saul*, it revealed who *the guilty party* really was!]

TRANS: Stephen’s heavenly vision was an encouragement in facing death, but also an affirmation of his *following in the way of the cross*. Stripped *naked*, just as His crucified Lord had been, Stephen was determined to *follow Jesus with his whole heart, to his last breath....*

III. Stephen’s Death Showed Us How to Live and Die— v.59-60, While

they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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. (3 parallels for us to meditate on...)

- A. Jesus and Stephen were both allowed by God to die naked.
1. Their persecutors meant it for *scorn*, but in God’s original plan, He created humans “in His image” *naked*: it meant *transparency, openness, truth* [Artists see God’s wisdom in this respect better than some theologians, for “*Truth*” *personified* is always sculpted or painted *naked*, and there’s no shame in that, except in a *sex-obsessed* culture like our own.].)
 2. On life’s *witness stand*, “naked truth” by its very nature, strips

off deceitful masks behind which falsehood tries to hide. [Cyril of Jerusalem wrote this about the early church practice of nude baptism: “*Having stripped yourselves, ye were naked; in this also imitating Christ, who was stripped naked on the Cross, and by His nakedness put off from Himself the principalities and powers, and openly triumphed over them on the tree.*”]

B. Jesus and Stephen both exemplified how we should face death:

1. A faith that clings to the loving God revealed in Scripture won’t resist facing the grave as some unbelievers do [Dylan Thomas wrote, “*Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*” But I say, “*Let us depart to be with Christ in brighter realms of light / bidding farewell without regret to this poor place of plight.*”]
 2. Stephen died praying as Jesus did on the Cross: “*receive my spirit.*” (That prayer showed full trust in the One really in control—not a *hellishly* angry mob, but the God of all power—*power* that now is in the hands of Christ who said in John 16:33 (NKJV), “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”)
- C. Finally, Jesus and Stephen both confronted the eye-for-an-eye vengeance in the OT law by practicing what was taught in the Sermon on the Mount— Mat 5:44, (NKJV), “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”
1. Stephen’s words, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them,*” was the ultimate testimony in his witness stand, exposing the bankruptcy of religious legalism. It proclaimed the victory of Gospel love over OT Law, through the *death and resurrection of God’s Son*.
 2. Stephen’s prayer mirrored Christ’s (“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing”), and it was dramatically answered by the later conversion of Saul, the one who supervised his stoning.

CONCLUSION:

–To take the witness stand for truth is to stand against falsehood, with no fear of standing alone, because Jesus always stands with us.
 –No fear of being nakedly open in our witness. With hearts washed in the blood of “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” we have nothing to hide, and God’s naked truth nakedly exposes falsehood.
 –No fear of defying falsehood or of dying for doing so. Ready to go home anytime God wants, but making sure we leave a clear testimony of Gospel forgiveness with those who continue to reject that Gospel.