

THE EXAMPLE OF STEPHEN'S COMMITMENT  
Acts 7:54-8:1

I.

Roger Brady is a retired Air Force four-star general and a Christian. Reflecting upon Memorial Day he writes, **“Most Americans will never serve in the military--- actually less than one percent of our population do so. [We are blessed to have a many times higher percentage than that in our congregation.] And even among those of us who do, very, very few of us are asked to give that last full measure of devotion. So what is the question for us on this day as we remember those Americans who died on our behalf? I believe that question is--- for what shall we live?”** (*Christianity Today*, 5/25/2018) I would frame it as the issue of commitment.

We admire committed people. A major reason that we admire committed people is that they tend also to be successful people. Jimmy Johnson (PROJECTOR ON--- JIMMY JOHNSON] is one such successful person. In 1987 he won the national college football title while coaching at the University of Miami. Later he became coach of the Dallas Cowboys. In 1993 and 1994 he won back-to-back Super Bowl titles. Now he is a football analyst for Fox Sports..

Jimmy Johnson is committed. A January 1993 AP news story commented, **“He’s obsessed with winning football games. It drives him day and night, like some mad scientist on a single-minded quest. He works hours akin to someone doing a double shift at a factory. His life is football; anyone interfering pays the price.”**

One of the most successful managers in baseball was Earl Weaver. (EARL WEAVER) As leader of the Baltimore Orioles he won six Eastern Division championships, four American League pennants, and a World Series championship. This Hall of Famer was committed to baseball. He spent five or six weeks every year in spring training. From April to October he was on the road with his team. The rest of the year he was planning for the next season.

In business success likewise comes from commitment. One of the most successful businessmen in our day was Malcolm Forbes, Sr. (MALCOLM FORBES) He earned his money through hard work and wise investments. His most famous accomplishment was perhaps serving as publisher of Forbes Magazine. Once his career was established, he did set aside time for having fun. But even in his recreational pursuits he was committed to having the biggest and best and fastest and most luxurious. He worked hard to be good even in his play. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Success in any field requires commitment. Commitment does come with a price tag. For Jimmy Johnson the price tag was a wife. When he accepted the coaching job at the Cowboys, he decided that he didn’t have time for a marriage. So he dumped his wife

and rented an apartment near the practice field so he could give all of his energy to his work.

This is what Earl Weaver said about the cost of his commitment: **“It cost everything.... my children are all married, grown, living away, four grandchildren, and I have had no time whatsoever to see them.”**

The cost for Malcolm Forbes was preparation for eternity. On his tomb are etched the words: **“While living he lived.”** The obvious question is: What about death and eternity? Did you make any preparation for that? The cost of commitment for the man we are going to look at today was his life.

All of us are committed to something. For most of us it is a number of things: work, family, faith, a hobby, a sport, education, or watching TV perhaps. All of these things come with a price tag. I would like for us this morning to consider our commitments. What is our highest priority in life? Is it worthy of our highest commitment? What is the price tag that comes with it? Are we paying the right price? Does the way that we spend our lives demonstrate that it is a worthy object of our highest commitment?

In recent weeks we have been studying the Book of Acts. The last couple of weeks we have been looking at the life of Stephen. Stephen is a transitional figure in the book. In Acts 1:8 we came across what appears to be the theme of Acts. Jesus is recorded by Luke as saying to His disciples, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

Jerusalem has been filled with the witness for Jesus. Now Stephen has come on the scene. He is a Hellenistic Jew, which means that he was born and raised outside of Judea and Jerusalem in another part of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. Now he is in Jerusalem. He has become a follower of Jesus, and he has become a powerful witness to other Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. More than any of his other contemporaries he seemed to understand the implications of the gospel. He seemed to realize that the traditional standards of Jewish holiness--- the land, the law, and the temple--- had been superseded by the death and resurrection of Jesus. His persuasive presentation of his case finally resulted in him being hauled before the Sanhedrin. We looked at his long historical sermon last week.

He concluded his address to this high council of Judaism that was meeting in the temple by saying, **“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”**

I.

Let's look then at vv. 54-56 and THE MOTIVATION BEHIND COMMITMENT. The procedure of the Sanhedrin in criminal proceedings was to state the charges against the accused and then to give the accused a chance to defend himself. If Stephen was trying to be found innocent of the charges of blaspheming against the temple and against the law of Moses, he didn't do a very good job. For he only inflamed the passions of the Jewish leaders. He had chosen to use the opportunity to address the spiritual and political leaders of the country by presenting the truth about Jesus. His commitment to Christ was going to have a high price tag.

Verse 54 describes the reaction of the members of the Sanhedrin (TEMPLE 009), which was meeting in the south wall of the temple compound: **"Now when they heard these things they were enraged [or more literally, cut to the quick], and they ground their teeth at him."**

A year or two earlier when all of the apostles had been hauled before the Sanhedrin (TEMPLE 006), the reaction of the Sadducees was that they were "cut to the quick." Now the text literally says that the Jewish leaders were **"cut to the quick in their hearts."** On the previous occasion the Pharisees had persuaded the council to refrain from executing the Christians. They still regarded the Jesus movement as being within the scope of orthodox Judaism. They no longer had such illusions. They recognized that this doctrine proclaimed by Stephen threatened the very foundations of what they understood to be orthodox Judaism.

The 71-member Sanhedrin a couple of years earlier had listened to Jesus Himself describe His claim to be the Messiah. They had him killed. A few months later they had Peter and John in to explain his healing of a lame man. Peter proclaimed that his power came from the Holy Spirit who had in turn been sent by the resurrected Christ. Some time after that all of the apostles were hauled in to court to explain their miraculous powers and their reason for refusing to stop preaching about Jesus. Again they heard the gospel. Now once more they are being exposed to the claims of truth about Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Truth and persuasive argument were not sufficient to convince these people. They needed a heart that was open. Theirs had become hardened. The danger always exists that when people are exposed to spiritual truth over and over again, they may gradually become hardened to it, so that even the most convincing evidence will be rejected. That is what happened to Stephen's listeners.

The next thing that Stephen says makes his listeners even more angry. In vv. 55 & 56 the text says, **"But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"**

The last time that the Sanhedrin heard someone use the title "Son of Man" was at the trial of Jesus. (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 14:60) According to Mark 14 vv. 60-62, **"And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer to**

**make? What is it that these men testify against you?’ (MARK 14:61) But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ (MARK 14:62) And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven..’”**

Jesus was quoting from the Book of Daniel. (PROJECTOR OFF) In #7 Daniel had a vision in which he saw One he describes as the Son of Man receiving a kingdom from God the Father which will rule over all of the other kingdoms of the world. The Sanhedrin saw Jesus’ claim to be the Son of Man described in Daniel 7 as blasphemy. He was claiming rights and prerogatives belonging only to God. So the Jewish leaders hauled Jesus off to Pilate to have him executed.

Now Stephen has a heavenly vision which provides vindication for his own actions. This Jesus whom he has served is in heaven. He is the Son of Man described in Daniel’s vision. Furthermore, he is at the right hand of God. This was an allusion to another famous passage of Scripture---Psalm 110. (PSALM 110:1) Verses 1 & 2 of Psalm 110 say this: **“The Lord says to my Lord:/ ‘Sit at my right hand,/ until I make your enemies your footstool.’/ (PSALM 110:2) The Lord sends forth from Zion/ your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!”**

Stephen is standing in Zion in the midst of the enemies of Jesus. But his Savior, the Son of Man is at the right hand of God, which is the position of power and influence. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is Jesus who has become the mediator between God and man. It is not the land. It is not the law. It is not the temple.

There has been considerable discussion about the fact that Stephen sees Jesus standing rather than sitting. The predominant view of commentators is that Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen. But also standing was the posture that witnesses took in a Jewish court. There is additional indication in Jewish literature of the time that a Jewish judge rendering a verdict would do so while standing.

Stephen seems not to have any defenders in the courtroom of the Sanhedrin. But before the only judge who counts in regard to eternal matters Stephen has an advocate, and a judge, in the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This all may have been a great comfort to Stephen. But his description of this vision is also a challenge to the Sanhedrin. The members must either confess their sin and acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of Man and the Messiah, or they must do away with Stephen. There is no doubt in their minds what should be done. They are in a rage to have him killed.

Stephen was committed to the cause of Christ. He was prepared to die for the sake of his witness for Jesus. Why? What was his motivation? Stephen understood that he was part of a cause that was worth dying for.

Notice in our text that it says that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. In Acts #1 v. 8 Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit came, His disciples would have power to be His witnesses. Stephen was a prime example of a Spirit-empowered witness.

The Holy Spirit had enabled Stephen to see and understand what even the apostles had not yet apparently grasped. The death and resurrection of Jesus meant that temple worship had been rendered obsolete. The Law had been fulfilled in Jesus.

Now Stephen gets a glimpse of the glory of God. In the Old Testament the glory of God was regarded as a revelation or manifestation of the divine nature. The Jews of the Sanhedrin were convinced that the glory of God resided in the temple. Stephen saw it in his vision as residing in heaven. Jesus Christ was also related to it. For Stephen there was no doubt about the worthiness of the object of His commitment.

People who are truly committed to a cause organize their entire lives around it. For a few that cause may be sports. For some it may be business. For some it may be one's career. For some it may be family. For some it may be money. For some it may be personal power.

For others the cause worthy of total commitment may be a political or philosophical movement. For millions of people in the twentieth century that movement was communism. Communism offered an organizing principle by which all of life could be analyzed and all of history evaluated. History was the story of class conflict between the capitalists and the proletariat. Life was seen as moving inevitably toward a climax when the proletariat would rule the world in a classless society. For this cause many would willingly die. Lenin once declared, **"Communists are dead men on furlough."**

For radical feminists feminism is the organizing principle of life. Feminism is a cause worthy of total commitment. History is the story of the struggle of women against the domination of men. The problems of our society are the result of patriarchalism. **"Women of the world, unite!"**

For many environmentalists the threat of global warming and climate change is the existential threat to our existence. That is a cause worthy of total commitment.

While there may be some value and truth in these causes, they all fall short of providing an ultimate organizing principle. In the end they do not deal with ultimate reality. It is Christianity alone that provides the organizing principle by which all of life can be explained and judged. It alone provides an adequate description for man's past and man's future. It alone provides the remedy for man's greatest problem, the problem of sin. That remedy is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this Savior and this movement that is truly worth dying for.

II.

In vv. 57 through the first part of v. 1 in #8 we come to THE IMPACT OF COMMITMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE IMPACT OF COMMITMENT) The

immediate impact of Stephen's commitment was that he got himself killed. Beginning in v. 57 we read, **"But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him."** These religious leaders were outraged at what they were hearing out of Stephen. So they covered their ears to keep from hearing more blasphemy--- or more of the truth.

What happens seems like a riot more than a legal proceeding. Some have questioned whether there was really any official ruling and whether any formal procedures were followed after this point. The Mishnah is a Jewish document that was written about 150 years later. It includes a section on the rules and proceedings of the Sanhedrin. According to the Mishnah an innocent verdict in a trial involving a capital offense could be given on the same day as the trial. But a guilty verdict had to wait until the next day. Obviously that didn't happen here.

Execution was supposed to be a reluctant procedure. The Mishnah said that the convicted criminal was also to be given a chance to confess so that he had the opportunity to share in the life to come. Then he was supposed to be pushed over a ten foot drop. If he was still alive, a stone was to be dropped on his chest. If he survived that, the witnesses were to cast the first stones. Then everyone else was to join in.

Whether the Sanhedrin violated its own rules is not certain. The Mishnah was written quite a bit later. On the other hand we know that in the night trial of Jesus there were probably a number of violations of the Sanhedrin's own rules. What we see here may not quite have been a riot, though. Reference is made in v. 58 to the fact that there were witnesses involved in the stoning, which might suggest that some appearance of a legal proceeding was still being maintained.

If you are really on the ball, you also might wonder why the Jews could pull off an execution without getting approval from the Roman governor. When Jesus was crucified--- though the Sanhedrin was ready to do Him in right away--- they had to go to Pilate to get the Romans to do the actual execution, remember?

For one thing Pilate's capital was not in Jerusalem but in Caesarea, which was quite a distance to the north and west. Governor Pilate usually showed up in Jerusalem only for the three big Jewish feasts. Then also we know that Pilate was relieved as governor of Judea by the Romans in 36 AD. Assuming that Jesus was crucified in 33 AD, this trial and execution of Stephen probably took place just shortly before the end of Pilate's rule. We know from history outside of the Bible that Pilate had trouble toward the end of his rule with the Samaritans. It was because of Pilate's manner of dealing with this Samaritan trouble that Pilate was kicked out of office. So perhaps the Sanhedrin knew about Pilate's troubles, and they weren't too worried about acting without getting his approval.

Verses 59 & 60 describe the actual death of Stephen: **"And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'. And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he**

**had said this, he fell asleep.**" The parallels with the death of Jesus are obvious. Stephen, like Jesus, commits his spirit to the Lord. But remember that Jesus committed His spirit to His Heavenly Father. Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus. The ability to receive a human being's spirit is an indication of deity. Jesus Christ was God. He was man's redeemer. His work on the cross gave Him the right to receive those who trust in Him.

Notice also that Stephen, like Jesus, forgives his executioners. Then he falls asleep. "Falling asleep" is a term that appears in the New Testament for the death of Christians. The terminology has prompted a doctrine that has been labeled "soul sleep." A few Christians hold to the idea that between the time that Christians die and the time when Jesus returns to earth, Christians just sleep.

This doctrine of soul sleep has been suggested a number of times down through church history. It has been rejected by most Christians for good reason. (LUKE 23:43) Jesus told the repentant criminal on the cross: **"Today you will be asleep"---right? No. "Today you will be with Me in paradise."** In 2 Corinthians #5 v. 8 (2 CORINTHIANS 5:8) the Apostle Paul wrote, **"...we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."** In Luke #16 Jesus told a story about the conscious existence of two individuals in Hades. They were not literally asleep. The term "falling asleep" is a euphemism. It is an expression designed to soften the idea of death for Christians. (PROJECTOR OFF) Death for believers means a body which sleeps until the resurrection of the dead. But the spirit of Christians is received by the Lord Jesus and experiences a conscious existence.

So how do you imagine that Stephen's wife or his mother or his children responded to the news of his death? Did it appear to them as a terrible tragedy? He had such a promising life. He had such abilities, and he had such a powerful testimony for the church of Christ. He was cut down in the prime of life by these corrupt power mongers on the Sanhedrin. How unfair! How evil! Why would the Lord allow this to happen? What possible good could it serve?

Stephen's relatives may or may not have realized the impact that Stephen's total commitment had. But two thousand years later we are reading about the example of his commitment. His commitment also had an impact on a guy named Saul, whose Roman name was Paul. Verse 58 says that the witnesses at Stephen's stoning laid their outer garments **"at the feet of a young man named Saul."**

Saul/Paul was a Hellenistic Jew like Stephen. But at the time Paul had no sympathy for Stephen's cause. According to v. 1 of #8, **"And Saul approved of his execution."** Paul had heard Stephen's arguments. Perhaps he had even argued with him himself. Paul saw clearly that Stephen's gospel of Christ was a serious challenge to contemporary Judaism. This movement had to be stopped, and Paul was ready to take an active part in stopping these Christians. He would later become a leader in the persecution of these Jesus people. Eventually he would see his own evil actions as making him "the worst of sinners."

On the way to a persecution convention in Damascus Paul would one day be converted by an appearance of Jesus Christ. But later in Acts 22 Paul would make reference to the stoning of Stephen. It had made an impact upon him. Through Stephen Paul had been exposed to the gospel. He had heard the arguments about how the death and resurrection of Jesus had made temple worship and much of the law obsolete. Paul would take the lead in bringing the gospel to the Gentile world.

Consider also this question: Where did the author Luke get his information about this story? Luke was not personally present. We don't know who exactly was allowed into the meetings of the Sanhedrin. I doubt whether Christians were welcome. We do know that students of the rabbis were allowed to sit in on these sessions, and Paul was a student of the great rabbi Gamaliel. It seems that he was there that day when Stephen gave his defense. Years later Luke would become the traveling companion of Paul. He no doubt got much of his information from him. I suspect that the story of Stephen actually comes through the testimony of Paul.

Stephen's mother didn't know any of this. The death of her son may have seemed a tragedy without any purpose divine or otherwise. But **commitment to Jesus Christ always has an impact for the Lord**. Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian church. Many more were to follow in his footsteps. But for them Stephen's testimony would be a source of confidence that the Lord Jesus was standing at the right hand of God to welcome them home for their faithful witness for Him. The church leader of the third century Tertullian would later affirm, **"The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The seed is the blood of Christians."** Those words have come down to us in the more familiar statement: **"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."**

One such martyr was Maximillian Kolbe (PROJECTOR ON--- MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE). He was a Catholic priest who established in Warsaw the largest Catholic religious house in the world. He developed a monthly magazine that had a circulation of over one million.

After the Nazis occupied this part of Poland, they arrested Maximillian Kolbe and sent him to Auschwitz. One day a prisoner escaped. Following the standard procedure everyone from the cell block was made to stand at attention for the rest of the day. When the escapee had not returned by nightfall, ten other prisoners were randomly chosen to be sent to the starvation bunker. One of them was a Polish man who cried out when he was chosen, **"My poor wife, my poor children! What will happen to my family?"**

Immediately Father Kolbe stepped forward and asked to take this man's place. The commandant agreed to the priest's request. So he was sent to the starvation bunker. As he was dying, he sang hymns of praise to God.

Another Pole, Franciszek Blachnicki (FRANCISZEK BLACHNICKI) saw and heard this take place. He thought that if a man could die with such conviction and praise, there



must be something to his faith. He committed his life to Christ. He survived Auschwitz and went back to Poland where he became a priest.

Father Blachnicki began the Oasis movement to help Polish young people living under Communism discover the same living faith that he had discovered. At the heart of this movement were summer camp retreats. One of the regular attendees at these camps was Father Karol (FATHER KAROL WOJTYLA), who later became archbishop of Krakow.

In 1975 a Polish American student, Joe Losiak, visited these camps. He met Father Blachnicki and told him about the Christian movement that he was connected with in the US, Campus Crusade for Christ. Father Blachnicki was interested in this.

So in the next several years Campus Crusade materials were translated into Polish and used by these Catholics. I have a friend who taught Biblical principles one summer in their camps. The man who was my spiritual mentor in college went to Poland for a year and taught Catholic priests Biblical principles and evangelism techniques.

Norm Geisler (NORM GEISLER), seminary professor and author, spent a summer in Poland teaching in the camps. He later said, **“What I experienced was a dynamic, joyous, Christian, and evangelistic community of believers who were more eager than most American evangelicals I know to learn and live the word of God.”**

This movement was allowed to flourish in Communist Poland and to have input from American evangelicals because Father Karol, the archbishop of Krakow, gave his blessing to it. In 1978 Father Karol invited Billy Graham to come to Poland and preach. On October 16, 1978, Billy Graham preached in Father Karol's church in Krakow. Father Karol, however, was unable to be there. For on that same day Karol Wojtyla (POPE JOHN PAUL II) was installed as Pope John Paul II in Vatican City in Rome.

Do I mean to imply that John Paul II was an evangelical? No, not in the theological sense in which we think of evangelicalism. But he was friendly to evangelicals, and he allowed his people in Poland to be exposed to clear Biblical and gospel teaching.

All of this that happened can be traced back to Father Franciszek Blachnicki who witnessed Maximillian Kolbe die for his Christian convictions in a Nazi concentration camp. His commitment to Christ had an impact far beyond what he could have imagined.

III..

Finally, let's consider OUR RESPONSE TO COMMITMENT. (III. OUR RESPONSE TO COMMITMENT) Christianity is a system of thought that explains the meaning of life. It corresponds to reality. It answers the fundamental questions of life: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is my purpose?

(MATTHEW 16:24) The Lord Jesus Christ challenges us: **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (MATTHEW 16:25) For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”** Stephen found that promise to be true. His example teaches us that commitment to Him should be our highest priority in life.

Is commitment to Jesus your highest priority in life? Does your life display that commitment? Is it reflected by the time you spend with your family? Is it reflected in your ethical behavior at work? (PROJECTOR OFF) Is it reflected in your giving of money to the Lord’s work? Is it reflected by the time you spend in reading and studying God’s Word? Is it reflected in the exercise of your talents and time in church, in your willingness to volunteer in the community?

Commitment to Jesus might mean a radical change in your life. It might mean doing something dramatic. It might mean something less dramatic. Michael Horton writes in his book *Ordinary*, **“...the tendency of the evangelical movement has always been to prioritize extraordinary methods and demands over the ordinary means that Christ instituted for sustainable mission.”** He adds, **“We are called to grow in a personal relationship with Christ. We are also called to love and serve others.”** So perhaps commitment for you means more dedication to a marriage or to family. Perhaps it means a more consistent devotional life. Perhaps it means a renewed seriousness about caregiving. Perhaps it means volunteering to meet a need.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Frodo whimpers to the Christ-figure Gandalf, **“I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.”** Gandalf replies, **“So do all who live to see such times; but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world...”** Such is the challenge that confronts all of us this Memorial Day weekend. As General Brady phrased it, **“For what shall we live?”**