

WHAT DOES A MARTYR LOOK LIKE?**Acts 6:8-8:1**

Intro: This is becoming ancient history for many of us but we do well to make sure we remember: In 1956, five young missionaries, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian—were attacked and speared by a group of Waorani (back then they were known as the Auca) tribesmen. They had landed their plane on a sandbar in an Amazonian Basin river and they had come to share the gospel with this very warlike tribe. They gave up their lives trying to share Jesus with people who desperately needed him. In the years following, two of the widows went to that tribe and evangelized them, now the Waorani are predominantly Christian. The tribesmen who killed the five young missionaries were impressed by the young men. They saw their obvious devotion to Jesus Christ. We know this because they lived to tell the story of the attack and they came to know Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Take a good look at the screen again because Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian are what a martyr looks like.

The Greek word from which we get our word “martyr” sounds very much like it. It is μάρτυς (martus/martys), which means witness. The word has evolved over the years to refer to someone who gives their life for their faith, but, has it really evolved? In truth, it is actually the ultimate witness.

So what does a martyr look like? They look like:

Jim Elliott and Friends Who took the Gospel to the Waorani and died doing it

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Who stood against Hitler and died doing it – he was hanged with piano wire just weeks before the Nazi surrender.

Dirk Willem Who saved his pursuer and died for his Anabaptist convictions.

William Tyndale Who translated the Bible into English (which was heresy in the eyes of the Church) and stood up to the corruption of the monarchy AND the Church and was burned at the stake for it.

And finally, even though there are no photos or paintings of him, the subject of our message today, and the subject of the entire long passage we are studying: Stephen.

Stephen is remembered as the first martyr, and since we don't have any likenesses of him, we need to give a spiritual description of what a martyr looks like.

Now, as I told you last week, the passage I'm preaching from today is exceedingly long (from Acts 6:8 to Acts 8:1) so I do hope you read it. As I told you then, you don't have to worry because I am not going to read the entire thing today. It is merely my background passage and I will pull verses as we go.

First. . .

Stephen was a Servant leader (Acts 6:1-7)

- He one of the first seven deacons selected by the church, which is part of which Pam covered last week. There we read, *they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch* Acts 6:5. How would you like to be remembered as a man or woman who was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit? Stephen was not one of the original disciples but he obviously stood out as a godly man and as a result the Church set him aside for the work of God. That work was the work of serving the Church. The word, “deacon”, comes from the Greek word διάκονος (diakonos) which means servant. So, Stephen was a servant of God and a servant of the people. That's what a martyr looks like.
- Then we also see here in the scripture, where it said earlier that he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit in verse 8 we read this . . .

Stephen was full of grace and power (Acts 6:8)

- Specifically, it reads that he was *full of grace and power* and *was doing great wonders and signs among the people*. Acts 6:8. There, it is again! He's doing great wonders and his faith makes that possible. Stephen spoke and acted with expectancy about a God who is there, who he, himself, had seen doing great things.
- That means that, in addition to being a servant of God and of the Church, he was also a bold preacher. We see here that he spoke the truth with wisdom and the Spirit and his accusers . . . could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Acts 6:10. So when they couldn't contend with the truth and wisdom, they made false accusations. That's what a martyr looks like.

- So we see that . . .

Stephen was horribly maligned (Acts 6:11-14)

- His enemies, even though they were supposed to be righteous religious leaders, resorted to bold face lies. Plain and simple, they made up stuff about him. Our text says that he was accused of speaking blasphemy (specifically, they said he was speaking against the temple) and they tried to stir up the people. Listen, . . . *and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."* Acts 6:13-14. The prevalent teaching was that God's presence was in the temple alone. But Stephen was preaching that the Holy Spirit was present in the life of believer, which made him a heretic – at least that's what the lies intended.
- Notice the last line of chapter 6. Even as these false witnesses were brought against him, it says in verse 15 that everyone who looked at him and sat in the council of the Sanhedrin saw that *his face was like the face of an angel*. Acts 6:15b. With the injustice flowing rampant against him he could have been justified in being just a little torqued – but Stephen didn't get angry nor did his face didn't turn red with rage. Instead, his face was like that of an angel. He was serene in the face of their accusations. He didn't sink to their tactics, instead he kept his eyes on heaven. That's what a martyr looks like.
- And notice how, even though he was accused . . .

Stephen still preached a powerful sermon (Acts 7:2-53)

- He started at the very beginning of Holy History and preached God's perfect plan. This shows a man who knew the Bible inside and out. Notice Stephen starts with Abraham, moves to Jacob, then Joseph, and the other patriarchs down to Moses and the Exodus and King David and then Jesus Christ, whom he reminded them, they had betrayed and murdered (Acts 7:52). He boldly preached the scriptures – holding nothing back through what in our Bibles is most of Acts 7. (A little aside: Here is a reminder that anytime we are tempted, as some are wont to, to say that the Old Testament isn't necessary with the arrival of the New Testament, that the fact is, the only scripture that Jesus had, and the only scripture that Stephen had and the only scripture that Paul had, and the only scripture that any of the New Testament authors had was the Old Testament. God's Holy Scripture was the Old Testament that Stephen preached to his accusers. Stephen boldly preached the word. That's what a martyr looks like.
- You'll notice in his sermon and in his interaction with the religious leaders . . .

Stephen didn't pull punches

- He boldly compared the religious leaders to the same people that had killed the prophets down through history. Not only that, he even compared them to the people who worshiped the calf in the days of Moses and Aaron – because they were worshipping a building (the Temple) rather than Almighty God. Only God is worthy of worship, and he would be worshiped in every corner of the world, and not just in the temple. In addition to those prophets they killed, now they had killed Jesus, who was the only way to salvation. Of course they didn't like that.
- The result of the truth and boldness of Stephen's message, especially when he called the members of the Council stiff-necked, was they lost their minds and murdered him. Notice though, even in their rage, they had the presence of mind to murder him outside of the city gates (instead of inside the holy city of Jerusalem) where they threw him down over a cliff and then threw rocks on him until they knew he was good and dead. That's what a martyr looks like.
- But before he died, and even as he was being stoned, our text tells us . . .

Stephen saw into heaven

- And what he saw was . . . *Jesus standing at the right hand of God*. Acts 7:55. Every other scripture who refers to Jesus in the presence of his Heavenly Father, has him sitting at the right hand and I'd like to think that Jesus was on his feet giving his servant, Stephen, a standing ovation. The beautiful thing is, even as they were killing him, Stephen loved and forgave the very ones who were throwing stones. Acts 7:60
- He was not worrying about the pain or about dying – he was seeing the prize for his faithful witness and that's why he was seeing into heaven. That's what a martyr looks like.

Conclusion: So Stephen is revered as the first martyr. Out of all the people who were there to witness his murder and throw stones, only one name is recorded besides Stephen's and it belongs to the person who is holding the coats. His name was Saul, a fanatical young Pharisee who was hunting down Christ Followers and bringing them to trial and, ultimately, he hoped, anyway, they would be executed. Saul was a witness as others did his dirty work. Later he would become Paul and he, too, would be a witness for the same Jesus of Nazareth that Stephen died for. Yes – he, too, was a witness who also became a martyr. We will see a lot of Paul as we journey through Acts.

So, even though we didn't have a picture of Stephen earlier, I'm thinking as you've heard what a martyr looks like, that you can now picture, in your mind's eye, this witness of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And as you do, you can truly say, you know what a martyr looks like. Amen.