



WARM-UP

(We recommend you choose 1 or 2 of the following questions.)

What do you do when someone really ticks you off? Makes you mad enough to want to throw rocks at them?

When was the last time you felt hostility from someone or some group of people? How did it affect you? How did you react?

What's the longest speech you've ever given? Was it received well? What makes a speech or sermon interesting or compelling to you?

WORD

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 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—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." When the members of the Sanhedrin 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 coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 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."

- Acts 7:51-60 (NIV)



INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter ends with Stephen before the Sanhedrin council facing accusations that he spoke blasphemy against the temple and the Law (cf. 6:13-14). Chapter 7 contains Stephen's defense to these charges, and the account of his martyrdom. Stephen's lengthy reply (the longest sermon in the book of Acts, twice as long as Peter's on the day of Pentecost) highlights Israel's history, including the building of the tabernacle and the temple. In verse 51, though, he turns his focus to the Sanhedrin, and they fly into a rage, which results in Stephen's death. This is also the catalyst for the gospel going from Jerusalem to "all Judea and Samaria" (Acts 1:8).

This past Sunday, November 5th was designated as the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Over 200 million Christians live under persecution worldwide. It's estimated that over 40 million Christians have been martyred for their faith since the time of Jesus' death. Today we read about the first martyr, Stephen, whose death marked the beginning of both widespread persecution of the church as well as the spread of the gospel into Judea and Samaria. Persecution and the advance of the gospel often go hand in hand. The church in China, while banned and persecuted under communist law, has exploded to where many believe there will be more Protestant Christians in China than in America within the next 10 years. The Christian church in the Middle East is experiencing unprecedented growth under the current Muslim persecution. Let's see what we can learn by studying the death of the first Christian martyr.

DISCUSSION

1. In vs. 51, what does Stephen mean by the phrases:

- a. *"You stiff-necked people!"*
- b. *"Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised."*
- c. *"You always resist the Holy Spirit"*
- d. *"You are just like your ancestors"*



DISCUSSION CONTINUED...

2. How would you have reacted to this event if Stephen was a brother, friend or classmate?
3. Persecution seems to be a catalyst to the spread of the gospel from the early days of Christianity there in Jerusalem to present day Christianity in places like China and the Middle East. Have you ever experienced persecution? How did it affect you?
4. Peter's speech in Acts 2 led to great growth for the church while Stephen's speech led to his death. What does this teach us about how God views success and failure?

APPLICATION

1. Is there anyone, any group, or any circumstance in your life where you feel you need to be a bolder witness? What step can you take this week to rise up as a witness for Jesus?
2. In terms of your circle of relationships and influence, how would you define your 'Jerusalem'? How would you define your 'Judea and Samaria'? What might you do to take your witness to the next group?
3. How can you prepare yourself, or how can we as a group help prepare ourselves to be ready to preach the gospel should the opportunity arise as it did for Stephen?

PRAYER

1. Pray for the 200+ million Christians living under persecution around the world.
2. Pray for the boldness to be a witness right where you live.
3. Pray for the church in America and in NYC that we might preach the gospel effectively and many souls would be saved.