

Christians, Take Your Stand

One of the summers when I was at the Seminary I went from congregation to congregation preaching the one sermon I knew. It was a great experience for me to gain confidence preaching God's word. It was also a great opportunity for me to meet many different people from different congregations. At one of those congregations, after I had finished everything for that Sunday and was getting my stuff ready to go, there was a guy who came up and introduced himself to me. He invited me out to Brunch. And, if you know me at all, it shouldn't surprise you that I accepted his invitation. He was a very interesting man. He had fought in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. We talked about a number of things. And finally, I asked him what gave him the courage to stand up against the enemy, day after day. His answer surprised me. He said that he saw men who were under cover and should have been protected—and yet, they were killed. He saw other men whose whole platoon was killed, and yet, they survived. Then he said. Jesus is going to call you home when he calls you home—not one second before, not one second after.

What made that man able to take his stand against the enemy was the knowledge that whether he lived or died, he belonged to the LORD, and would be with the LORD. This morning we meet a man who had to take his stand—not against the Nazi's or Imperial Japan. No, he had to take his stand against people who hated the truth and hated especially the truth about Jesus. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us: *"Acts 7:54 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." Acts 7:57 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. 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."*

Jesus called on Stephen to take his stand. And, I invite you to read the rest of chapter 7 in the books of Acts. Stephen preaches an amazing sermon. He walks through the history of the Hebrews. He recounts for them how the LORD was continually good to his people. And his people were continually bad to him. They refused to listen to him. They refused to listen to his prophets. They killed his prophets. And they even killed the Messiah, Jesus himself. Stephen boldly tells the Jewish officials: *"Acts 7:51 "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—"*

When Stephen said these words, that was the time when they had had enough. That was the time when they gnashed their teeth at him. That was the time when their hatred for Jesus moved them to action. They threw him out of the city. And then they stoned him. Now, I have to admit, all the times I have read these words, I thought, that after there were a couple of big stones thrown at him, that Stephen died rather quickly. Not so. In the greek, it says that they *kept* throwing stones at him. That was how great their anger was. They continued to stone him until he was dead.

At this point we are forced to ask the question: how could he do it? How could he endure such hatred and such pain? How could he endure all of that and not give in and beg for mercy? How could he not abandon his Savior to save his life? How could he ask Jesus to forgive them, even while they were killing him? We find the answer in these words: *"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."*

Stephen endured all of that evil because he saw Jesus, standing. Elsewhere in scripture, it says it even more forcefully. Jesus isn't just standing. He's also *sitting*. In our second lesson, the writer to the Hebrews told us: *"Heb. 7:26 Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."*

In our bible study in the book of Hebrews on Sunday mornings we have been talking about this point in great detail. Jesus is better. Jesus is better than the Old Testament High priests. Why? He is better because he made *one*

sacrifice. And that one sacrifice paid for *all* sins. As a result, Jesus could stand around. He could even sit. Because the work of paying for our sins was completed when Jesus lived and died for all of us.

That is what Stephen saw. He saw Jesus standing there, not offering any more sacrifices. That's what gave him the courage to stand up against all the evil poured out against him. For, just like the other disciples, Stephen had abandoned Jesus. But, seeing Jesus there in heaven standing there, done with his work of saving the world from its sins, gave him strength. It gave him hope. It let him know that *his* sins were forgiven. It let him know that he was enduring this pain not as punishment because of his sins. No, instead, he was enduring it because the world hates the sheep just as much as it hates the Good Shepherd.

Stephen took his stand. And he was able to take his stand because he saw his Savior standing, not sacrificing or suffering anymore. He knew his sins were forgiven. But as we read these words there was another, very important reason Stephen could take his stand. Stephen cried out to the Jews around him: "56 *"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

Stephen saw Jesus standing. But where was he standing? He was standing at the right hand of God. Now, what does that phrase mean? What does it mean to be at the 'right hand' of someone? First of all, let me tell you what it is *not*. This is not a literal statement. It's a useful figure of speech. How do we know this. Literally, it says that Jesus stands at the right *hands* of God. Note the plural. God is spirit. He doesn't even have one hand, let alone two.

What then does this phrase mean? The right hand was the powerful one. That was the sword hand. That was the hand that did the lifting, the cutting, the hammering. The right hand was the hand of strength and power. In Psalm 118:16, it says: *"Psa. 118:16 The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD'S right hand has done mighty things!"*

So, when it says that Jesus is standing at his Father's right hands, it is the Hebrew way of saying that Jesus has complete, absolute power and control. And Stephen knew that since Jesus had all the power in the universe, he would see what Stephen was going through. He would give him the courage to stand up against those gnashing teeth and hurled stones. And finally, he would use that power to usher him into heaven.

Stephen took his stand against the evil in his time. What about you? Are you ready to take your stand? For there will be a time when you will be forced to make a choice. Will you stand up for your Savior? Or will you be silent? In fact, no doubt, there have been *many* times in your life when Jesus called on you to take your stand. And, no doubt, there have been many times when you abandoned Jesus, as did Stephen and the twelve. As we think of those times, we look through the eyes of Stephen and we see what he saw. And it gives us so much comfort and hope. We see a High Priest who is done sacrificing. The sins of the entire world are paid for. So then, my sins are paid for. Your sins are paid for—even those sins you committed when Jesus called on you to take a stand for him and you were a coward.

And, as we consider this fact, our hearts yearn as Stephen's did to have an opportunity to speak the truth. Our hearts yearn for an opportunity to take *our* stand. And as you look forward to that day and time when Jesus will call on you again to stand for him, I would like you to remember two, very important truths.

In order to have strength *for* Jesus, you need to have strength *from* Jesus. How will you be able to speak the truth against the lies if you don't exactly remember the truth like you used to? This is why I continue to invite and encourage you to come to bible study where you learn in detail what God's word says, so that you will be able to stand with confidence against the lies in this world.

Take your stand, knowing God's word. And, finally, take your stand knowing Jesus' power. When you are persecuted because you follow Jesus, when you are ridiculed because you struggle to do what is right, when you will hear the lies against God's word and zealously and jealously stand up for him, remember this: You are not alone. Just as Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to Stephen, he will also send the Spirit to you.

So then, my brothers and sisters, take your stand. Take your stand, knowing that Jesus sits. And since he sits your sins are forgiven. Take your stand knowing where Jesus sits. He sits at the right hand of his Father. He uses all his power for you. Amen.