

LIVING MARTYRS

PASTOR DAMIAN KYLE, CALVARY CHAPEL MODESTO, CA



And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

ACTS 7:59-60

A living martyr is a Christian who, instead of being called to lay down their life in a single moment for Christ’s sake, is called to daily and faithfully lay down their life where God has chosen for them to live and to serve Him for His glory. Most of us will not die a violent death for our Christian faith, but our witness for Christ and willingness to die for Him should not be any less than those who will.

The apostle Paul, who would himself one day die a violent death because of his faithfulness to Christ, described a living martyr in Galatians 2:20: ***“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”*** When Agabus later prophesied about Paul’s imprisonment, Paul said to those begging him not to leave, ***“I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus”*** (Acts 21:13b).

This was true not merely of Paul’s life: in Romans 12:1, Paul calls every Christian to present him- or herself as a ***“living sacrifice.”*** Being a Christian is a very serious thing. God’s intervention in human history through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the introduction of light into a scene completely dominated by darkness since Adam and Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden. It took the death of the Savior to break through that darkness and bring salvation. The death of Christians over thousands of years has contributed to the

advancement of His Gospel. The same calling and commitment to the point of death is as required of all Christians today as ever it was in the early Church.

Strength to Stand

When we talk about this kind of thing, it’s natural for us to wonder, *If I ever faced the choice to die or deny Christ, would I be able to be faithful?* Thus it is important to notice how active God is at the death of the first martyr, Stephen, in Acts 7, and to realize He will be just as active at our death—be it from stoning or from natural causes after a long life lived for Him. Verse 55 says Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. Christians do not fill themselves with the Spirit; God does. Why would Scripture tell us that Stephen was filled with the Spirit except to let us know

What a privilege it is to be a martyr—whether expressed in living or dying, to bear witness to the most important message humanity will ever hear.

He would never call us to endure something like this without also giving us the Spirit’s fullness and grace to victoriously stand no matter how weak we are? The Bible abounds with verses like Deut. 33:25 and Phil. 4:13, which declare God gives us strength when we need it. Today He gives us strength for the things we will face today; when the day of death comes, He will supply us with the grace we need to face it, just as He did with Stephen, Paul, and countless pilgrims in two thousand years of Church history.

The Holy Spirit also gives Stephen a glimpse of Heaven’s glory (v. 55). Think of the intensity of Stephen’s situation. He could not have torn his eyes, mind, or emotions away from its violence. God overwhelmed the horror

and injustice of Stephen’s death with Himself. Heaven became more powerful to Stephen than what was happening. Notice particularly Jesus’ presence (v. 56). Jesus is always described as sitting at the Father’s right hand in Heaven, but Stephen sees Him standing. Perhaps Jesus is standing to welcome the first martyr into Heaven. This is true not only for Stephen, but for every Christian. At our moment of death, however it comes, Jesus will personally receive us into Heaven.

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself.” JOHN 14:3a

Under the weight of stoning, Stephen goes from standing to kneeling, crying out, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (v. 60). Finally came the stone that slipped Stephen out of his battered body into Heaven’s glory. The word ‘sleep’ (koimáō) describes Stephen’s death because it was so peaceful in contrast to the surrounding violence. Saul, who watched every nanosecond of Stephen’s death, would later write (as Paul) concerning a Christian’s death, ***“Oh Death, where is your sting? ...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”*** (1 Cor 15:55a, 57b). I wonder if images of Stephen’s death filled his mind as he wrote it.

A Solemn Privilege

The story of Stephen is a beautiful passage because it demonstrates not only how to live and die as a Christian, but also that the Gospel and God’s Kingdom are worth dying for if we’re called to it—and all of us are. What a privilege it is to be a martyr—whether expressed in living or dying—to bear witness to the most important message humanity will ever hear: How Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures. The Gospel has been true for two thousand years, and it remains true today—and it’s still worth living and dying for. ✚