

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Survival or Sacrifice?

Acts 7:54-8:3

In the cafeteria at Princeton Theological Seminary there are three bronze plaques inscribed with the names of graduates who paid the ultimate price for their witness to the kingdom of God. They are: Walter Macon Lawrie—Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea, 1847. John Rogers Peal—Killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou, China, 1905. James Joseph Reed—Fatally beaten at Selma, Alabama, March 11, 1965.

Behind each life, and death, was a story of faithfulness for the sake of the gospel, a story akin to the one about Stephen in this morning's Scripture from the book of Acts. According to Luke, Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the disciples soon after the resurrection to look after distribution of assistance to the widows in the church. In particular, Stephen was noted for his faith, his wisdom, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. He stood out as a worker of miracles and as a preacher of the gospel.

But because of his witness to the gospel, Stephen ran afoul of some of his fellow Jews. He was arrested and charged with slandering the law and the temple, as well as claiming that Jesus would destroy the temple and overhaul the customs instituted by Moses. Stephen tried to refute the charges by giving a speech indicting Israel for resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting the Messiah. This enraged his opponents. Then when Stephen claimed to see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, he sealed his demise. His accusers seized him and stoned him to death.

In the history of the church, Stephen is viewed as the first Christian martyr. He paid the ultimate price for his witness to Jesus Christ. His story challenges those of us in the church who follow Jesus in circumstances where we don't face an imminent threat to our very lives. For the most part, we're not in any grave danger because we identify ourselves with the risen Lord. In fact, it's hard for us to even conceive what it's like to put our very existence at risk for the sake of the gospel.

But in numerous countries, there are many who do know what it's like. They walk daily in the footsteps of Stephen, faithfully bearing their witness in an atmosphere where hostility to the reign of God turns each day into a matter of life and death. Even though their stories often don't make the news, their courage and sacrifice become a channel for the spread of God's good news.

Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned for 14 years for being the pastor of an underground church in Communist Romania. During three years in solitary confinement, he faced torture and unbelievable despair. Yet through that despair, he experienced a depth of faith he never knew existed. He said, "It was in the midst of suffering I experienced the everlasting love of Christ."¹ Pastor Wurmbrand went on to establish a ministry called The Voice of the Martyrs. Since 1967, The Voice of the Martyrs has been helping Christians who are persecuted for their devotion to the Lord, including telling their stories, thereby inspiring a deeper commitment to Christ among all who seek to fulfill the Great Commission.

Another example of faithful endurance was Sarah Liu, who was born in a restricted nation where freedom of religion simply didn't exist. When she openly practiced her faith, she was arrested and tortured. She was forced to walk barefoot in circles around a room while interrogators beat her hands and feet. Eventually she was walking in a trail of her own blood. But Sarah wouldn't deny Christ. She later said, "I thought of Christ being beaten on the way to the cross. He suffered for me and in a small way I shared in that suffering for Him. It gave me courage to survive my time in prison."²

In the midst of persecution, Richard Wurmbrand and Sarah Liu looked to Christ. Stephen himself, in the face of an angry mob, looked to heaven and saw Jesus seated at the right hand of God. He knew that God, not nations or human beings, rules the world. He knew that Jesus is Lord. But he also knew that Jesus' Lordship is demonstrated through the self-sacrifice of the cross. He knew this so well, and believed it so much, that it became visible in his own life as a follower of Jesus. Even as the stones were hitting him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

If those words sound familiar to you, it's because they're almost verbatim what Jesus said as he was dying on the cross. I believe Luke tells us the story of Stephen's death partly to remind us that Jesus' followers are supposed to imitate Jesus in their own lives. In other words, those who confess Jesus as Lord are called to live, and to die, as Jesus did.

Now that doesn't mean that laying down our lives accomplishes all that Jesus' death accomplished. He's already died for our sins so that we could be saved. He's already done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. But those who place their trust in him, and in what he has done for us, are called to live in a way that reflects and embodies Jesus' self-sacrificing love.

I've told you the story of Richard Wurmbrand and Sarah Liu. Listen also to the story of a young man named Damare. When he was only 10 years old, Damare was sold as a slave. Because he was a Christian, one Sunday he snuck away to attend a church service. When he was discovered, Damare was dragged to a field where his owner nailed his hands and knees to a board and left him to die. Miraculously, Damare was rescued. Later he said, "I forgive the man who did this to me. Jesus was also nailed [to a cross], and He forgave me."³

The way of Jesus is supposed to be evident in the lives of Jesus' people. At one level, this applies to the church. It means that the church's primary goal isn't self-preservation. On the contrary, the church's main purpose is to lay down its life so that the good news of God's kingdom, and the love of God in Christ, can be spread to others.

One of the keys to doing that is to focus more on mission than on maintenance. This shows that we as a congregation value sacrifice more than survival. It shifts our attention from preserving ourselves to propagating the gospel. I like the way that Harold Percy puts it: "The maintenance congregation thinks about how to save their congregation. The mission congregation thinks about how to reach the world."⁴

One of the important things about the stoning of Stephen was what happened after it. According to Luke, Stephen's death was not an isolated incident. On that same day, violence broke out against the whole community of Christians in Jerusalem. Believers were scattered into Judea and Samaria. But praise be to God, these refugees became like seed, taking root and bearing fruit in new places. The Word of God spread. The gospel advanced into new territory. Persecution became the impetus for evangelism.

One of the great leaders and writers in the early church, Tertullian, once said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” We see the truth of that statement in the story of Stephen, and the stories of all believers who have paid the ultimate price for their loyalty to Jesus. They prized the kingdom of God more than their own existence. And through their sacrifice, the gospel has been ignited not extinguished.

As we listen to the story of Stephen, and the accounts of more contemporary Christians who have been attacked, kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured, ostracized, discriminated against, and in some cases killed for their faithfulness to Christ, it’s easy for us to see ourselves in a different category from these modern day martyrs. Their willingness to put themselves at risk for the sake of the gospel seems to put them in a different league from those of us who are trying to bear our witness for Jesus in a more safe and secure environment.

Yet in reality, we’re a lot more like these martyrs than we may think. Our lives may not be in daily jeopardy because of our commitment to Christ, but aren’t we still supposed to be laying down our lives, in our specific context, out of loyalty to the Lord? Your own life, day in and day out, is packed with circumstances in which you must choose between self-giving and self-preservation. You must decide whether what you will gain is worth what someone else will lose. You must determine whether to relinquish your own interests for the sake of another’s interests. You constantly face situations where you have to decide between surrendering yourself to a greater good called the kingdom of God or securing yourself in your own personal kingdom that’s destined to pass away.

Believing that Jesus is Lord means that you care more about sacrificing than you care about merely surviving. That’s what laying down your life for the sake of the gospel is all about. In fact, that’s the way the gospel gets spread. The good news doesn’t get spread by individuals and churches that prize self-preservation over self-surrender. No, the gospel gets spread, the kingdom of God gets extended, and people get saved through the witness of congregations and individuals who are willing to take the risk of placing their lives in the hands of God, for the sake of others.

One of the ways you can do that is by being more aware of, more informed about, and more responsive to persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world. Read and follow their stories, such as the June 13 massacre in the town of Yelewata in Nigeria. One Christian relief agency summarized it this way:

Islamist militants stormed buildings where Christian families—already displaced by previous attacks—were seeking shelter. Under cover of heavy rain, the attackers set fire to doors and opened fire on sleeping families. By morning, up to 200 of our brothers and sisters were dead. Survivors and local clergy are calling this the single worst atrocity the region has seen in years.⁵

Even more recently, a suicide bomber targeted a Christian church in Damascus, Syria during its evening worship service. The explosion was followed by gunfire. The attack left 20 Christians dead and 52 more wounded. Other parts of the world where fellow believers are experiencing some of the most intense persecution include India, North Korea, China, Sudan, and Iran. So as we follow international events, especially ongoing wars and other forms of conflict between nations, it’s important to remember that other followers of Jesus, fellow disciples, part of the global body of Christ, are there in these parts of God’s world, enduring, persevering, and seeking the Lord’s help and strength to be faithful in their profession of Christ as Lord.

So pray for them. Pray for the Lord to strengthen them in their faith, to care for and help them, and to renew them in hope each day. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and encouragement in their witness, so they can be a light for the gospel in places and circumstances of darkness, disaster, and suffering. Give to agencies and causes that promote awareness of persecuted Christians, and that provide resources for relief and daily needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care. Support organizations that are involved in advocacy, raising a voice on behalf of all who suffer for their faith in Jesus and taking their stories into the halls of power where government leaders and public officials make decisions that affect human rights and religious freedom. These are some of the ways that you can be a Great Commission Christian in the world, not just surviving, but sacrificing for the sake of Christ.

I'll close with part of the Scripture read earlier in our service, from Hebrew 13: "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (vv. 1-3).

¹ Advertisement in *Christianity Today* (January 2008).

² See note 1 above.

³ See note 1 above.

⁴ From Percy's article, "Good News People." Cited by William H. Willimon, "Maintenance or Mission?" *A Peculiar Prophet*. October 23, 2006. April 17, 2008 <<http://willimon.blogspot.com/2006/10/maintenance-or-mission.html>>.

⁵ Tobin Perry, "Standing with Nigeria's persecuted church after the Yelewata massacre." Global Christian relief. June 17, 2025. https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/yelewata_nigeria_attack/ (June 25, 2025).