

Date: 21.3.21
 Text: Acts 6:8-7:42
 Title: Lord make me like you
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“Lord make me like you, please make me like you. You are a servant make me one to. O Lord I am willing, do what you must do, to make me like you Lord, please make me like you.”

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That was one of the first choruses I learnt when I became a Christian as a teenager. And it is one that I still remember, even though I haven't sung it in over 30 years. “Lord make me like you, please make me like you.” I wanted that as a young Christian and I want it still as an older Christian as well. But how much do I want it?

Do what you must do, Lord. What you must do! What about a life of singleness, that's what I wrestled with in my 20's. What about a seemingly incurable, debilitating disease, like chronic fatigue, that's what my training for the ministry brought me. What about times when there were no friends, what about conflict that seemed to rip your heart out, what about rejection and slander? Do I really want to be like Jesus if the life that will get me there is really very costly?

Well what about you? Do you want to be like Jesus? Are you willing to say to him do what you must do, to make me like you Lord? In Acts chapter 7 we find that the first Christian martyr Stephen was willing. For right at the very beginning of the life of the Church we get this picture of a man who wanted to be like Jesus. And whose life mirrored Jesus is so many ways. He was someone who lived like Jesus lived. Someone who was opposed like Jesus was opposed. Someone who spoke like Jesus spoke. And in the end, someone who died like Jesus died.

And yet he is just like us, a normal every day human being. It is possible for people like us to sing that chorus and for God to grant us that wish. Let's see how it all worked out in Stephen's life. For in chapter 6 we are introduced to Stephen who

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1. Lived like Jesus would live (6:1-15)

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

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In this chapter we get a snapshot of Stephen. To be chosen to serve he needed to be full of the Spirit, full of wisdom and in verse 7 we also hear that he is full of faith. Stephen was full of it! Now when we say that today we often imply the person is full of hot air or full of themselves. But Stephen is full of God. Full of Jesus.

And because he had this sort of godliness, this Christlikeness, he put up his hand up to serve. The widows were missing out on food. The Church was stretching at the seams. So Stephen says I will do something. I am willing to be a servant and to serve those around me.

Remember on the last night of his life Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and picked up the water basin and washed his disciple's feet. He said I have served you, now go and serve others. For the Christian life is about service. And serving the elderly was not beneath Stephen because it was not beneath Jesus. Like his master, Stephen serves.

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But that is not all. ⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke."

Stephen was also full of God's power. And that power enabled him to serve and to stand up to others. So when there was push back from the local synagogues over this message about Jesus, Stephen debates with them. But he does it as a man full of grace, not trying to win the argument but hoping to win people for Christ.

And that just makes them even madder. They accuse him of false theology and then they start a campaign of lies against him which ends in an eruption of violence. That's straight from the devil's playbook, isn't it? If you can't play the ball, play the man. And so in a blink of an eye charges are made against Stephen that he is speaking blasphemous words against Moses & against God.

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"This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

It's deja vu all over again, isn't it? Here is someone who wants to live like Jesus and they are doing what they did to Jesus to him. They are taking him before the Sanhedrin, they are assembling false witnesses, they are willing to be judge & jury to stop this talk about Jesus.

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Now isn't that what Jesus said to his disciples in John 16? ²⁰ "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me."

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You see if we sing "Lord make me like you, please make me like, you are a servant make me one too." Then God may well answer that prayer. He can fill you with the Holy Spirit, he can give you the wisdom and grace to enable you to serve him in any situation. But you also might find yourself in hot water. You might find yourself opposed because of Jesus. Like people in Victoria might find themselves in the future due to the laws passed down recently. Like millions of our brothers and sisters are finding out throughout the world today.

Like Stephen was. He is charged with speaking against Moses and God, the temple and the law. Stephen is now in a dilemma. He is accused of dangerous crimes. If he is not careful he

could lose his life, here. So what is he going to do? Think of his wife and kids and their need for a husband & father? Think of the widows in the Churches, they will need people like him to continue to serve them & look after their needs? Think of himself, he has so much that he wants to do with his life? Or think of Jesus and defend him! Stephen lives like Jesus would &
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2. He speaks like Jesus would speak (7:1-53)

So in the next 53 verses Stephen defends the charges against him. Now before we look at the details of this speech, let me point out there are 19 speeches or sermons in the book of Acts. Proclaiming, preaching, witnessing is an integral part of the book of Acts. And this is the longest of all the speeches. Its longer than Peter's Pentecost sermon, than his message to Cornelius, even longer than Paul's sermon to Areopagus in Athens. Why's that?

I think it is because this speech is acting as a defense for Stephen, an accusation against the Jewish leadership and a manifesto of why the book of Acts is going to turn out as it will. You see this speech is the first turning point in the history of the Church. It's going to herald the events and the reasons why God's Kingdom will no longer stay in Jerusalem but is going to leave the nest so to speak, spread wings and begin to fly.

So to summarise these verses very quickly, Stephen says

- God's end goal was not the law or the temple it was Jesus
- God has been with his people throughout history and is not confined to one building in Jerusalem but is there wherever his people are
- And it is the Jewish leadership that are the ones attempting to frustrate God's plans not the Christian Church.

Let's dive in and quickly trace Stephen's argument. He concentrates on four key times in Israel's history, starting with Abraham. 2 "*Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran.*" 3 "*Leave your country and your people,*" God said, *'and go to the land I will show you.'*

Stephen emphasises God's initiative. God appears, God speaks, God sent & God promised. Before the law is given. Before the Temple is built, even outside of the promised land God is calling his people to walk with him, to obey him, to follow Him. That continues into the next epoch where God continues to look after his people even in the land of their enemies Egypt. He rescues them from their troubles by sending Joseph ahead of the rest of the family into Egypt and fulfills his promise to grow his descendants.

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And yet he does even more remarkable things during the time of Moses. He sends his people a Saviour who is subsequently rejected by them. Moses leads the people out into the desert and God appears to him on a mountain in the middle of nowhere. Moses is to take his sandals off because this is holy ground. You see wherever God is, it's holy. And where ever God's people are God will surely be with them.

And so when Stephen moves onto the fourth period of time covering David and Solomon and the building of the Temple he can declare God doesn't live in a temple, heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool. God has already appeared to his people in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in the desert and in Israel. He is not tied to the one place.

And so when he sends his last and final prophet, Jesus, promised by Moses himself, then the Jewish people did what they always have done. Like father like son, they were the ones who rejected God's Saviour. They are the ones who should be on trial. In fact you are the ones who killed the Righteous One. You are the ones who have broken the law. And you are ones who have failed to see that Jesus is the one both the law and the temple pointed toward.

Stephen speaks like Jesus had spoken before him. He fails to defend himself against the charges because he is too busy defending God and His way. And he is accusing the Sanhedrin of not only opposing Jesus but opposing God's plans for his world. You see Stephen is laying down a marker for the Church. God doesn't reside in Jerusalem. God is the lord of heaven and earth. And so wherever God's people go, God will go. And so when he sends them to the ends of the earth in Jesus name, they will go with the same Spirit and the same grace and the same power as Jesus had.

Here is someone who wants to speak like Jesus speaks and God doesn't save him from himself or his predicament. But gives him courage. And gives him grace. And gives him the words he needs to witness to Jesus Christ. So if we are going to sing, "Lord make me like you, please make me like you" then it might be a dangerous thing to pray.

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Because Jesus kept pointing people to God. And the people around him didn't like that. And here we find that Stephen wants to be like Jesus and so he keeps talking to others about God as well, he keeps pointing people to Jesus and they don't like that either. How did Jesus put it in Matthew 16? *"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."*

Stephen has a chance to go quiet and save his life. But when he looks at his circumstances he sees a once in a life time opportunity to witness to Jesus. To lay down a marker for the Church. To serve others by telling them the good news. In the previous chapter he served them by distributing bread to the widows. Now he is points others to the bread of life.

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Now I don't know what I would have done if I was in Stephen's position. But I do want to live as Jesus would live and I do want to speak as Jesus would speak. But I know my weaknesses. I know that I could never do something like Stephen has just done. But what if God is preparing me with the next conversation, the one that I have with one of my family members who thinks what I believe is rubbish? What if he is training me through the good times and bad so I know that God is with me whatever the circumstances? What if the Holy Spirit gives me fresh courage when I am next in a tight spot? Stephen lives like Jesus would live, speaks like Jesus would speak and

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3. Lastly, dies like Jesus would die.

For we have seen the persecution against the Church gathering momentum so far in the book of Acts, haven't we? In chapter 4 the disciples are imprisoned and warned, in chapter 5 they are flogged and now in chapter 7 Stephen is killed.

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin 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."

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As FF Bruce once said, "Stephen has been confessing Christ before me and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God." For when Stephen looks up into heaven, he is given a vision of the glory of God. Now how amazing would that be? And in this vision who is front and centre? Why Jesus is standing at the right hand of God.

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God is with him. And Jesus is standing! Standing? Normally a ruler would be sitting, why should the sovereign get up off his throne. But Jesus is standing. He is standing to defend Stephen against his accusers. Actually he is acting as a judge about to condemn Stephen's accusers. Yes, Jesus is standing. He is active not passive. He is still at work through His local Church, through people like Stephen who are living, speaking and even dying in his place.

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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. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 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."

In a frenzy they can't even wait to call the Romans in to do the deed for them. They illegally take up the stones themselves. They drag him out of the city and belt him with rocks. And look how Stephen dies. Just like Jesus. Jesus said on the cross, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit" and Stephen says "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." They both commit themselves to the God who is in charge of the whole universe, who has the whole word in his hands. And they both offer words of forgiveness.

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Jesus says "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." And Stephen says "Lord do not hold this sin against them." You see there is no revenge, no getting even. Instead, there is grace, forgiveness, a calling on the father to remove these spots and stains from before them. That the kingdom of God might be known as a kingdom where sinners might be forgiven. Where people who have rejected God might find grace. Where those who deserve death instead get eternal life.

"When he had said this, he fell asleep." What a wonderful expression. An unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful description of so brutal a death but one which the spirit of Stephen gives up his life up for his Lord. And so Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. Actually the word martyr comes from the Greek word witness. For if we are called to witness to the risen Christ it might mean giving your whole life to the risen Christ, being a Christian martyr.

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And many, many Christians have done just that. It has been reliably calculated that during the 20th century approx. 26,625,000 Christians died for their faith all around the world, making today the most dangerous time to live as Christians in the history of the world. And it has been estimated that as the persecution gets worse that around 1 in every 200 Christians worldwide will die for Christ this century if the Lord doesn't return beforehand. 1

in 200. That means on average one of the people that come to our Church today across our four services could well die sometime in their life for the faith that we all hold dear.

So why doesn't God intervene? Why didn't Jesus use his power over this court and protect his servant Stephen? A heckler once asked that question of a street preacher. While he was preaching, the man shouted out 'why didn't God do something for Stephen while they were stoning him?' The preacher replied, "God did do something for Stephen. He gave him the grace to forgive his murderers and pray for them." What a good answer!

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So why didn't he intervene, let me make a couple of suggestions. When Stephen dies he is welcomed by a standing Saviour into heaven. He doesn't miss out, he gets to enjoy the presence of God for all eternity. And while Stephen is stoned a young rabbi Saul holds the stoners robes and he gets to see close hand what service to the Lord is all about. And in the next chapter Saul will begin a quest to destroy the Church but over the time the risen Jesus will appear to him and turn him into the one who helps fulfil the mission of taking the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

And we will see next week that the persecution intensifies and the Christians have to hot tail it out of Jerusalem to save their lives. And so they are forced, kicking and screaming to go out and fulfil the great commission. Like a DANDELION; you crush it and you blow away the flower; but what you're doing only spreads it all the more. As somebody once said "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

And the Church has in its back catalogue the preaching of Stephen that where ever God's followers go, God is. So they are confident that as they go out from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, they don't go alone, God is surely going with them.

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"Lord make me like you, please make me like you." If we sing that we may need to put our life on the line. It might mean taking up the cross. Following Jesus unto death. Are we willing to do that? To put Jesus before your wife, your husband, your kids, your career, your money or your life? Because what you are willing to die for are the things that you will ultimately live for! I don't believe that one day you wake up and make a decision that if a madman put a gun at your head and said, do you believe in Jesus, that you would say yes to him no matter what. You only get to that point if you have put Jesus first yesterday and the day before and the day before that.

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Let me put it this way. If you live until you are 75 years of age, then you will have lived approximately 27,000 days. Now if each day were represented by \$1.00, that's \$27,000 you have to spend in your life. Martyrs like Stephen are asked to spend that whole amount on the one day. They give up their whole life, all at once. The rest of are asked to give up a \$1 every day. Every day we are to give God that whole 24 hours. And if you can't give today to God, you will never be able to give him the rest of your life.

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How does Paul put it in Romans 12? *"Therefore I urge you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."* Today live as Jesus would live. Speak as Jesus would speak and be ready to die as Jesus would die. So whether you spend \$1 or \$27,000 today we are spending it all for Jesus.