

"THE GODLY UNDER PRESSURE"

(Acts 6:8-7:60)

(Chuck Swindoll)

Acts 7 records for posterity the testimony of the first Christian martyr. Stephen may have been the first documented instance of a believer dying for his total devotion to Christ, but he wouldn't be the last. Since that time, history has been punctuated with periods of persecution in which men and women have given their lives for their faith. Stephen's example of a godly man under extreme pressure by the authorities leads me to a couple of practical reminders as we face our own pressures for living godly lives in a world increasingly hostile to God's standards of truth and righteousness.

First, *when you walk with Christ, the world will usually resent it, not support it.* We have unrealistic expectations if we think the secular school or college we attend is going to rejoice that we're walking with the Lord. And those in your workplace, family, or circle of friends who are offended by the positions you take on issues of faith or morality will often oppose you, not politely disagree with you.

You see, when confronted with the reality of their sinfulness by seeing it in the mirror of a testimony of righteousness, the world will be enraged, not receptive. Acts 7:54 says, "When [the Jewish leaders] heard this, they were cut to the quick." They were riddled with conviction. Their reaction was visceral and audible—they began gnashing their teeth at him!

Why do we so often expect to be applauded, respected, or at least politely disagreed with when it comes to our countercultural Christian convictions? Let the warning of Christ prepare you to persevere under increasing pressure from the world around you: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

Second, *when you respond with truth, the pressure will increase, not decrease.* After the Sanhedrin gnashed their teeth at Stephen, our hero of the faith didn't seek the best legal representation to defend his personal religious rights, fight back with either physical or rhetorical weapons, or back down from his convictions to keep the



peace. Instead, he proved to be personally empowered by and devoted to the triune God: "But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55-56).

How did the rulers respond? They screamed, covered their ears, and rushed upon Stephen with an impulse to kill (7:57). In fact, they drove him out of the city and proceeded to stone him. Think of that! Those executioners were seemingly good, righteous people, but they nevertheless picked up stones to stone him. They dragged him out of the city and began pummeling his body with stones. And these were the religious leaders ... those who had been taught from early on "Thou shalt not kill!" If those who claimed to be devoted to God were treating His witnesses this way, imagine what the enemies of God and all that's good will do.

Actually, we don't have to imagine. We have countless examples throughout history of the godly being put under pressure and keeping the faith.

So be ready! We must always be prepared to respond with godliness to the ungodly, even when it means losing comfort, reputation, friends, family, freedom, or even our very lives!