Esther Ahn Kim was a devoted Christian woman who lived during the Japanese occupation of Korea during WWII. She knew she would eventually be thrown in prison for refusing to worship idols, so she began training herself. She ate decaying food to prepare herself for the food she would eat in prison. She memorized over 100 chapters of the Bible because she knew she would not be allowed to keep her Bible in prison. She spent countless hours praying and fasting, asking God to prepare her for the agony and torture she would go through.

When Esther finally was arrested, she followed the Spirit’s leading to reach out to her fellow prisoners with the love and grace of Jesus. She gave others her food so they would not go hungry, she cared for their physical needs, like holding someone’s feet to keep them warm, and she shared the Gospel with the prisoners around her.

Esther ministered to countless other people in her six years in prison. Her witness was so powerful that even the jailers and the government officials took notice.

Francis Chan wrote about her story in his book *The Forgotten God.* He says, “She could have just endured her suffering like a good Christian, and we would have applauded her for it. But she was not content to merely endure. She was ready every day and every moment, asking God, “Who do you want me to love for you today?””

That is a woman who clearly showed the power of the Holy Spirit in the way she lived even while being treated like a criminal. Today we’re going to look at the life of a man who was very much like Esther. Living every day for God, standing fast in his faith no matter what the consequence, and showing others the love of Christ even while they executed him.

When the Apostles needed someone to lead the ministry of caring for the Greek widows, they chose a man named Stephen. He was called a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. That word ‘full’ is the Greek word πλήρης that means to be lacking in nothing. We’ll see just how true that was of Stephen in our text for today.

**Acts 6:8 (ESV) — 8** And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Last week we talked about serving in the church, and how Stephen was chosen to do a specific task serving inside the church. He ministered to the Greek widows. Here we see that Stephen didn’t limit himself to only serving inside the walls of the church, but he was also making a huge impact outside the church as well. He was involved in both the internal, and the external ministry of the early church.

Stephen was not one of the Apostles, and yet he was out among the people doing great wonders and signs, just like they had been. That shows us it was not the Apostles’ status that allowed them to do those things, it wasn’t some special secret they alone knew.

Stephen was relying on God for his strength and power, and he was doing things in the name of Jesus that he was not capable of doing on his own. Stephen, just like the Apostles, could only do these signs and wonders because he was full of the Holy Spirit.

Stephen was devoted to his faith. He was devoted to sharing the Gospel. And there was a group of people who didn't like that.

**Acts 6:9–10 ESV — 9** Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. **10** But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

The synagogue of the Freedmen was a synagogue that was made up of those who had been freed from slavery. These were Jews from different places all over the world that began to fight against Stephen for the things he was doing in the name of Jesus.

The early church, especially Paul on his missionary journeys, often took the Gospel to the Jews first. Sometimes that worked out wonderfully. The Jewish people found out that their Messiah had come, believed in Jesus, and began to grow more disciples of Jesus from there. But sometimes, those Jewish people took what the early church was teaching as a threat to everything they knew and held dear.

These men arguing with Stephen were angry. They couldn't win in a straight battle of wits, they couldn't out-debate Stephen thanks to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, so they resorted to deception instead.

**Acts 6:13–14 ESV — 13** and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, **14** for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

They convinced people to lie about Stephen and claim that he had been speaking blasphemy against Moses and against God. In their argument, you can see that they weren’t only concerned about whether Stephen was being faithful to God. They felt threatened because what Stephen was teaching challenged their traditions.

If they believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the fulfillment of their hope as Jews, then it meant an end to everything they had known for over a thousand years. Their main complaint about Stephen was that he was teaching that believing in Jesus would change the customs that had been given to them by Moses. They arrested him simply because he was trying to change the way things had always been.

What they couldn't see is that their focus on their traditions, and customs, and keeping everything the way it had always been was keeping them from seeing Jesus for who he really was. It was keeping them from knowing the incredible forgiveness found in knowing Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

If we think that's a problem that was limited to first century Jews, we're only kidding ourselves. In the ensuing couple thousand years or so since the events of the book of Acts, we have come up with an incredible amount of traditions in the church. They come and go sometimes, but we Christians are generally a pretty traditional bunch.

Traditions are okay most of the time, and they do serve a purpose. They sometimes help us cultivate a closer relationship with Jesus. But if we allow ourselves to get hung up on those traditions, we can easily get to the point where we focus on our traditions and customs so much that we miss Jesus. And that is a very dangerous thing.

When Stephen was brought before the council, he stood in front of the very men who had put Jesus on trial. In fact, there are a ton of parallels between the martyrdom of Stephen, and the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

Both Jesus and Stephen stood trial before the high priest and the Jewish council. They were both accused of blasphemy by false witnesses. They both spoke of the destruction of the temple, and a temple not made with human hands. And they both forgave their executioners as they were killed.

Stephen also seems to be a direct fulfilment of some of the prophecies of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples they would be given the right words to say, and wisdom so their opponents could not refute them. He also told them they would see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God. Stephen realizes both of those prophecies in what we read here in Acts 6 and 7.

Luke gives us a parallel here between what happened to Jesus, and what happened to Stephen here in Acts 6 and 7. I think he does that to illustrate what it looks like when we truly follow after Jesus.

Our goal as disciples of Jesus is to be people who are constantly learning from Jesus how to be more like him. People who look a little more like Jesus every day. But far too many Christians are content to just coast and not grow any deeper in their relationship with Jesus. We don’t like to change, and we don’t like to get out of our comfort zone.

In any other area of life, it’s simply not acceptable to not make improvements, to not change and become better at what you’re doing. If you begin a job working at a construction company, there’s a considerable learning curve at first because you’re new. But by the time you’ve been there a year, two years, or more, you ought to know your stuff and be pretty good at your job by that point.

If you continue to do the same quality of work several years down the road as you did in the beginning, you’ll probably be out of a job. If you continue to play a sport at the same skill level in high school as you did in grade school, chances are you aren’t going to make the varsity team. And if we all drove today the way we did when we were 16, we’d all be in trouble. You have to get better as you go.

In almost every area of life, it’s simply unacceptable to not make progress. But for some reason, being a follower of Jesus doesn’t seem to fall into that category very often. Many Christians seem perfectly content to chug along at the same level of spiritual maturity they’ve always had.

But that’s not what a disciple does. Being a disciple means being committed to growing deeper in your relationship with Jesus all the time, continually making your own life and character look more and more like Jesus. That’s why we can look at the life of Stephen and see so many parallels to the life of Jesus.

When we live as disciples of Jesus, it is a powerful witness of the Gospel and grace of Jesus. But it also makes you a target for the hatred of the world. Jesus said in:

**John 15:18 (ESV) — 18** “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

Jesus' teaching was radical, it was life changing, history changing. The world hated it, and it hated him. They killed him for the message he brought. They did the same thing to Stephen. Jesus’ words rang true in Stephen’s life, and I think it’s safe to say that’s because Stephen was following Jesus’ footsteps well.

A question we ought to be asking ourselves on a regular basis is when is the last time the world disagreed with what I said. When is the last time the world and I clashed? Because if you begin to clash with the world, it might be a sign that you are becoming more like Jesus.

But if you always seem to agree with the world around you, you never have any qualms about what is going on in the culture around you, you begin to find yourself preaching tolerance and political correctness rather than Jesus. Well then you might need to take a good hard look at yourself and figure out whether you are headed toward Jesus, or away from him.

Stephen’s goal was not to change a bunch of traditions and tick off the Jewish leaders. Stephen's only goal was to preach the Gospel. He was trying to introduce these men to Jesus. But the Jews felt threatened, they felt like he was attacking their customs and traditions.

When the High Priest asked Stephen if these trumped up charges were true, Stephen had an opportunity. This was Stephen’s chance to defend himself, to set the record straight, to clear his good name. But he didn’t do that at all. Stephen’s speech recorded here in Acts7 is the longest recorded message in the book of Acts, which shows you how important it is. That’s also why I’m not going to read it for you right now, but I would encourage you to read it on your own.

Stephen didn’t even attempt to defend himself. Instead, he went through the history of Israel and outline three things. The first was that God is not static. God himself does not change, but he is a God of change and progress.

The theme that runs throughout the entire Bible, Genesis to Revelation, is God hard at work to redeem humanity, to bring them salvation, to move them toward progress and change for the better. That flew in the face of the Jew’s traditions that they couldn’t let go of.

The second thing he showed was that God’s blessings were not limited to the land of Israel and those who followed Jewish tradition. Stephen showed though examples of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses that God and his blessings were not limited to one little area of the globe, and he blessed those who followed him faithfully, regardless of their heritage.

The third thing he showed through his speech was a slap in the face to the Jews. He didn’t pull any punches, he came right out and said that those who were in opposition to the followers of Jesus were just like their forefathers who had a long and storied history of opposing and resisting God.

Stephen didn’t sugarcoat his message, and I believe he knew the danger he was in. Still, he didn’t shrink back, but told them exactly what they needed to hear. Rick Atchley, who is the Senior Minister at The Hills Church in Fort Worth Texas, said, "Sometimes I put vegetables on the plate for the church because I know that's something they need."

If you’re a parent, you know you do the same thing for your kids. As parents we give our kids what they need, not necessarily what they want. Stephen didn’t hide the ugly truth from the Jewish leaders, because they needed to hear exactly where they stood. This is what he said:

**Acts 7:51–53 (ESV) — 51** “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. **52** Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, **53** you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

That was enough for the Jewish leaders. Nobody likes having their own past failures thrown in their faces. The trial was over. Now they were an angry mob, and they did what angry mobs do. They acted in anger and killed Stephen.

**Acts 7:54–8:1 ESV — 54** Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. **55** But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56** And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” **57** But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. **58** Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” **60** And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. **1** And Saul approved of his execution.

Stephen is significant in the history of the church, because he was the first Christian killed for his faith in Jesus. But he’s significant because of so much more than that. I want to highlight three things that I think we should take away from the life and death of Stephen.

The first and most important thing is Stephen’s devotion to Jesus. I’ve entitled this sermon Ultimate Devotion, because that’s what Stephen showed. He gave his life for Jesus because of his devotion to him. Jesus said in:

**John 15:13 (ESV) — 13** Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Now obviously we often talk about that verse in regard to Jesus laying down his life for us, how he was the greatest friend we could have. Jesus did that for us and Jesus did that for Stephen, but Stephen also did that for Jesus. Stephen showed his love for Jesus in the most powerful way he could, by giving up his life for him.

Could you give your life for Jesus? If you had to choose between renouncing your faith in Jesus, or losing your life, what would you do? Hypothetical questions like that are hard to answer, because sometimes we don’t know how we’ll react until we’re in that situation.

Stephen could have tried to talk his way out of this. But that’s not devotion to Jesus. That’s devotion to this life. This was not a hypothetical, it was very real for Stephen, and it’s very real for thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who deal with that choice every day.

Stephen was able to stand up and say the things he did, he was able to stand firm in the face of his own death, because he was devoted to Jesus. He made Jesus his priority. Stephen could do what he did because he made Jesus the most important thing in his life.

When Jesus becomes the most important thing in your life, your greatest desire will be to get closer to Jesus. But in order to do that we have to put Jesus ahead of all the other things in our lives that we’ve allowed take first place. Our jobs, our possessions, and even our family and friends, all of it has to come in second place to Jesus.

Second, Stephen’s death shows us how powerful the grace of Jesus is that Stephen was able to forgive those who were in the middle of killing him. How we treat those who mistreat, and yes, even kill people for their faith, is one of the most powerful witnesses of the grace of Jesus that people will ever see in this world. For many of us, myself included, if we lost a family member, or God forbid, a child to some kind of violent attack, our response would be anger, rage, maybe even a longing for vengeance.

Stephen didn’t respond like that at all. Stephen forgave his killers even while they threw the stones. The only other person in Scripture who forgave his killers while they were executing him was Jesus himself. Stephen was so filled with the Holy Spirit, and his faith in Jesus was so strong, that he could follow Jesus even in that.

Finally, Stephen teaches us that if we are devoted to Jesus, if we have made him the most important thing in our lives, then we no longer have to fear persecution of any kind in this world. Being devoted to Jesus is much more important than adding any time at all to our lives here on earth.

We don't have anything to fear in this life because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. That’s why Stephen was able to give his life for Jesus with confidence. That’s why he was able to forgive his killers. And that’s why he was able, even with such a violent and painful death, to leave this world in peace. Because he knew that the end of this life was just the beginning of eternity with Jesus.

So the question we are left with today is, how confident are you? Are you truly devoted to Jesus? Are you confident that if you left this world at this moment, you would be with Jesus?

Ester Ahn Kim had that confidence that no matter what happened to her, she would be in the arms of her Savior. That gave her the ability to show the love of Jesus no matter what. Stephen was so confident in his faith in Christ that he could go to his death without fear and forgive those who murdered him. What about you?

We’re going to have the worship team come back up now, and we’re going to have a time of invitation.

If you have never given your life to Christ, if you don’t have that confidence that you will spend eternity with Jesus, then we invite you to make that decision today. It’s the most important decision you will ever make, because it not only affects your life right now, but for all eternity.

If you are a believer, and you have never been baptized before, we invite you to make the decision to do that now as well.

And if you are a believer who does not belong to a local congregation, we would love for you to call Agape Christian Church your home.