

Biggest Loser 3

In America, there are three major holidays that center around our nation's noble causes: On the 4th of July we celebrate our freedom, in September we honor those living veterans who have served in our military, and today, the most solemn of all American holidays, we remember those who have paid the ultimate price of giving their own lives for the causes of freedom around the world. Memorial Day is to America what the Lord's Supper is to the Church.

This is not a time to argue over "just cause." It is a time to remember, honor and give thanks to God for those who have come closest among all human activity, whether they realize it or not, to demonstrating the most perfect and complete act of Christ-like love and sacrifice, that of giving their lives. (John 15:13)

What is it that has compelled some of the finest of our young people, past and present, to put their own lives on the line, often on foreign soil?

Mary Ann remembers her older brother, Roger, as a bit of a mamma's boy – a happy-go-lucky guy who'd find joy in his collection of LPs, comic books and his pet dog. What Roger never got a chance to be was an awesome dad or a softhearted grandfather.

Army Pfc. Roger Lee Acree was killed by a mortar blast on July 14, 1967, while serving in Vietnam. He died four days after his 20th birthday.

“He was missing in action for a while and then we were notified a few days later that they found his body,” his sister recalls. The story as she heard it: “One of his friends in the same unit was in a foxhole and had started to come up and Roger jumped on top of him. Roger was hit by mortar and the person under him was saved.”

What provokes such heroism and self-sacrifice? I don't know the heart of every man and woman who has given his or her life in the line of duty while serving in the US military, but I would like to make an educated guess that the most common thread is a love for God and a yearning to promote the opportunity to experience freedom, real freedom, politically and spiritually throughout the world.

This self-sacrificing spirit was not born in the 1700's in colonial America. It was actually birthed in the first followers of Jesus Christ who, following the ultimate love-sacrifice of their Messiah, laid their lives on the line for sake of spiritual freedom from sin's bondage and tyranny.

Born out of the conflict over the Hellenistic Jewish widows being neglected in the ministry, seven men were chosen, presumably the first deacons, to oversee that ministry. They were called principally to serve in an in-house ministry of the church, but one of these men went beyond what was expected or required of him.....

8 Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Then some from what is called the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of

both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he spoke. ¹¹ Then they induced men to say, "We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God!" ¹² They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came up, dragged him off, and took him to the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They also presented false witnesses who said, "This man does not stop speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the law. ¹⁴ For we heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Acts 6:8-15 (HCSB)

What was a deacon doing "performing great wonders and signs among the people?" I thought he was supposed to be serving the widows. Who did he think he was an apostle or something? Stephen was a layman. He wasn't called to preach. He was just a church member. He had to have had a full-time job doing something. He was just serving the church and the kingdom on a volunteer basis. Where did all this wisdom and Spirit come from so that he even confounded the greatest challenges to his faith? And when was the last time you saw a deacon, while being slandered and lied about, in a time of great conflict, having a face like the face of an angel?

Right in the middle of all those lies and slander, in front of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, Stephen preached a

message. He started with Abraham, then Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons. He talked about Joseph in great detail about his being sold into Egypt, the famine, the reunion with Joseph and his brothers in Egypt and the family's move to Egypt to survive the famine. He spoke of the explosive population growth of the children of Israel and their enslavement under and different Pharaoh that didn't know Joseph. Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin of Moses, his birth, being rescued and raised in the home of Pharaoh, his killing of the Egyptian, flight to Midian, meeting God in the desert, return Egypt, and deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. He spoke of Israel's rebellion in the desert, the golden calf, and the turning back to the desert. Then he spoke of Joshua who led the people to claim the land God promised them. He spoke of the portable tabernacle, David's desire to build a permanent place of worship, and Solomon's fulfillment of that dream.

Then Stephen really messed up. He accused the Sanhedrin of being stiff-necked, resisting the Holy Spirit, their forefathers of killing the prophets who spoke of Messiah coming, and them for killing Messiah. Before he could finish his gospel presentation and give the invitation.....

54 When they heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him. **55** But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God's glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, **56** "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" **57** Then they screamed at the top of their voices, stopped their ears, and rushed together against him. **58** They threw

him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They were stoning Stephen as he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin!" And saying this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:54-60 (HCSB)

Stephen was chosen to be a deacon because he was thought to be full of the Holy Spirit and he did not disappoint. Throughout the entire ordeal, his life, inside and out, was filled and guided by the Spirit of grace, comfort and truth. His special glimpse into the heavenly scene must have aided Stephen in placing and keeping his eyes on Jesus throughout the entire ordeal. He never seemed to worry about what men might do to him. Even as the deadly projectiles were pummeling his body, He behaved and even spoke nearly the same as his Lord and Master Jesus behaved and spoke while he was crucified.

Stephen's last words and death demonstrated a totally self-denying, self-sacrificing spirit. His willingness to die for the cause of Christ was fearless. He was one of the first Christian martyr's and his amazing story is memorialized in God's Word. No doubt it had to have had a major impact on the great persecutor Saul of Tarsus.

There is really not much point in memorializing American service personnel or a great servant of Christ if we can't learn and grow from their sacrifices. What can we learn from Stephen?

Stephen Memorial:

Laymen serve- Pastors/missionaries/evangelist are called out for special places of service, but every true believer is called to serve, proclaim the gospel and impact their community. At least some of the weakness of the church in America today lies on the fact that so many church members incorrectly think that if they show up occasionally on Sunday and drop a few bucks in the plate that they've done their part. Everyone who is saved, like Stephen, needs to get involved in the total work of the ministry of the church.

1 I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, **3** diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds [us]. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope at your calling; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Eph 4:1-6 (HCSB)

Everyone is gifted and called to serve. You don't have to have Reverend before your name to be a Stephen. As you live, as you go, intentionally make Christ known, share the gospel, tell your story, serve and give.

Deny self- Stephen apparently was not concerned for his own safety, reputation, or standing in the community. No one forced him to get out in Jerusalem and make Christ

known. He did it because He loved Jesus, the church, and people. I'm sure he thought he was doing what every Christian ought to be doing.

He had to have been aware of the dangers of publicly proclaiming Christ. The people responsible for crucifying Jesus were still in places of authority and power. Stephen apparently considered the risk to his own life worth it in order to make Christ known.

Jesus Himself not only promoted but required this spirit of self-denial.

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. **25** For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it. **26** What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life? **Matt 16:24-26 (HCSB)**

Keep your eyes on Jesus- Stephen seemed to be totally oblivious to the accusations, lies, and slander being hurled at him from all directions. His face was like an angel..... He doesn't seem to even have noticed the rocks being chucked at him with satanically evil fury and hatred that literally pounded the life out of his innocent body. He saw Jesus standing and prayed for forgiveness for his attackers.

It seems we go through much of life looking over this shoulder then the other worrying about this person and that person, wondering what they think or do, and maybe even finding ourselves casting judgment on them for what they say and do or don't say and don't do.

Who do we serve? Whom should we be concerned with what they think?

³ When I am afraid, I will trust in You. ⁴ In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not fear. What can man do to me? **P**salms 56:3-4 (HCSB)

¹ Therefore since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that lies before us, ² keeping our eyes on Jesus, ¹ **H**eb 12:1-2 (HCSB)

We need each other. We draw strength from one another. We encourage one another, but we must keep our eyes on Jesus following His example of self-denial, faithfulness to purpose, and enduring, sacrificial love for all mankind.

What will people say at your memorial service? What will your children say about you? What will your church friends say about you? What will your unsaved neighbors and co-workers say about you, or will they even come? You are preparing for your memorial service today. Stephen has already had his chance. Those who have died in defense of freedom have ceased their opportunity. How will you be remembered?

Healthy churches are full of Stephens. Will you be a Stephen?