

## MAXIMUM IMPACT IN OUR WORLD

November 8, 2009

### SERMON TITLE- ACTS-traordinary: Prayer for the Persecuted Church

#### NOTES BY BILLY GROSS

#### International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

(Acts 6:8 – Acts 7: The Story of Stephen the First Christian Martyr)

As we recount the story of Stephen's death for the Kingdom, we join with the church around the world in remembering our brothers and sisters throughout the world who suffer because of their faith. In 40 nations in the world, Christianity is declared illegal by the government, and followers of Christ face discrimination, imprisonment, and death because of their devotion to Jesus. In another 11 nations, Christianity may not be officially illegal, but Christians are an oppressed minority, socially and economically.

Most of us took from the altar the name and description of a nation where Christians are persecuted. I encourage us **to continue to pray** for this nation **beyond** Sunday, and let this intercession move us to pray regularly for ALL our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world. ONE day of remembering and praying, while good, seems a rather small expression of support. "Lord, help us to remember."

Stephen – a model and inspiration for us:

- A man full of: Faith, Holy Spirit, Wisdom, Grace & Power (together -- a very effective combo!)
  
- A model of faithful servanthood - in *small and large* things: from serving tables, to doing miracles, to boldly proclaiming the Gospel, to giving his life!
  
- In the face of threat, Stephen preaches a brilliant summary of the story of God that boldly declares:
  - God has never been confined to a temple building. (He is the God of all creation, the earth is His footstool.)
  
  - God's revelation is always progressing. (His full revelation coming in the person of His son, our Lord Jesus.)
  
  - Israel has always resisted and rebelled against the revelation and leadings of God. (Culminating in the crucifixion of His son, their own Messiah.)

Acts 7:54-60 . . . three responses in this event of Stephen's martyrdom:

- The religious leaders respond with refusal to hear the truth, with fury, rage, and violence (rooted in both arrogance and fear).
  
- Stephen's response to their fury:

- He is consumed with Jesus!
- He cries out to the Lord
- He asks forgiveness for his attackers
- He dies in peace (“he fell asleep”)
- Jesus’ response to all this:
  - He STANDS in ovation, to honor Stephen for his faithfulness
  - He uses this evil deed for good - - the resulting persecution and scattering of Christians broadcasts the gospel throughout the known world.

“Holy Spirit, strengthen and enlarge our faith to live like Stephen. Be glorified in our lives. And again, remind us of our brothers and sisters throughout the world who are suffering for you.”