

FIRST BLOOD

Acts 7, 12

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. How many of you remember the first time **someone else** caused you some pain—maybe shed a little of your blood? My best friend, Steve, was the first to cause me some bloodshed. He was batting, I was catching—and I went up to give him some advice—not noticing that the pitcher had already lobbed the ball. Steve swung, missed the ball—but caught me right between the eyes! BAM! Well, I came to, got 4 stitches, and we were best friends for the next 9 years! And that baseball bat explains, well...**everything** about me! I owe it all to Steve!

-But accidents happen, right? Sometimes the pain people inflict is **intentional**—and that’s the worst kind. And it doesn’t always break the skin. There’s emotional pain, social pain—financial pain!

- a. Pain of **any** kind is an incredible motivator. A recent issue of Time magazine dealing with chronic pain says:

Pain is the human bodyguard, the cop on the beat racing to the scene, sirens wailing, shutting down traffic. You’ve been cut, burned, broken: pay attention, stop the bleeding, apply heat, apply cold, do something...This sensation we seek most to avoid is in fact one of the most essential ones for our survival. (Time, p. 62)

-Is there anyone here who likes to **avoid** pain? There are people in our world who **know** that!

Like parents. For some parents, it’s a **time out**—or the loss of a privilege. For my parents, it was a spanking—and it was **very** effective. Although I did have to tell them on my 21st birthday that enough was **enough!**

-The law enforcement systems in our world use pain with expertise. Inconvenience, humiliation, restriction and loss have been honed to a fine art. Dentists are good at it, too. They use little pointy probes and needles and drills as reminders, **“You vill brush your teeth...and floss!”** Fitness centers use **mirrors** and well-built instructors; terrorists and bullies use intimidation and fear. Pain avoidance is an **amazing** motivator!

- b. Here’s the question. What if **pain avoidance** is being used to keep you from what you really, **really** need to do? Like engaging in God’s mission—to bring everyone to Himself—and make all things right?

-I mean, can **you** think of anyone who would **want** to keep this world in chaos and keep people from being transformed? I can. He has a name: Satan. He—and those who have joined his team are **experts** at using our desire to avoid pain and inconvenience to stop God’s Mission. And that’s what I want to talk about.

2. The book of Acts—the unfinished chapter of God’s mission -- starts with a legacy: Jesus’ suffering and death. Jesus had a very brief—but pointed announcement to his disciples about pain: **Expect it!** He said, **“In this world you will have TROUBLE!** But, it’s okay—don’t hyperventilate--I’ve overcome the world!” He also said, “If I’m the Master—and *I* suffer—you probably will too!” He warned of imprisonment, execution, friends and family turning against them—I mean, following Him was **not** for the faint-hearted!

-And then they watched **Him** get betrayed, hauled off in a mockery of justice—and tortured. He was humiliated, kicked around, spat on—and then nailed to a stake as a public spectacle—and a warning, “Follow **this** guy—and this will happen to you!” Bullies are **very** good at intimidation!

- a. The fear this created in those followers was **totally** offset by the courage that the Spirit brought when He baptized them. And **He** gave them the courage to publicly accuse the authorities of executing their Messiah—right in the city where Jesus had been condemned to death!

-What you see in the early chapters of the book of Acts is mostly about the leaders trying to intimidate Jesus followers into stopping their preaching and healing. They get hauled in—and Peter’s courage is amazing. He says, “Do we obey God...or **you?** Think we’ll choose to obey God!”

-And **that** friends, is something that we need to truly understand if we’re going to follow Jesus—no matter **what** it costs! **Who do I listen to? Who do I obey? What’s my price tag? What could my culture give me that would entice me to flip off God—and the whole reason He created me?**

- b. It’s pretty clear in this passage that Jesus’ followers know—the pressure is **not** going to let up—and that they will **not** be able to permanently avoid **pain and embarrassment!** So—they prayed. “God, you see what’s going on here! Please give us **courage!**”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:31 NIV)

3. They get the courage they asked for—and it’s a good thing, because the religious professionals aren’t about to let up either. The miracles the apostles performed in Jesus name create this incredible tension; the authorities have the upper hand in being able to inflict pain and discomfort—but they **can’t perform miracles.** And they stand to lose their authority. So they haul them in—intending to kill them, but flog them instead. Listen to the reaction.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. (Acts 6:41-42 NIV)

a. Well, in the process of dealing with some complaints in the church over favouritism in the food distribution, the apostles appoint 7 Greek-speaking leaders to give oversight to caring for the problem. Well, out of this fresh group of leaders—amazing things began to happen. Two men in particular, Philip and Stephen, seem to be especially anointed by the Spirit.

-Stephen—a Greek-speaking Jew—was having an amazing ministry—accompanied by signs and wonders. But his powerful proclamation of Jesus as Messiah caused trouble—and he was hauled in before the high council in Jerusalem and accused of blasphemy. But he doesn't back down one bit! He gives this amazing message, recording how the Israelites have made a career out of frustrating the God they claim to belong to—and then, to top it off, crucified the Messiah He sent! Listen to what happened:

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 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. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:54-60 NIV)

-And Stephen was first of hundreds of thousands of martyrs to give his life for Jesus' sake. Fascinating, isn't it—that instead of screaming, "**That's okay! You'll get yours, you filthy swine!**"—Stephen sounds like Jesus--the One he saw, standing and waiting for him at the right hand of God.

b. Now, where did Luke, the author, hear about this? Well, he was a physician who traveled with Paul—still known as Saul here. And the next chapter starts by saying,

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:1-3 NIV)

-When you understand that Stephen and Saul were **both** Greek-speaking Jews, it's likely that Saul was at least part of orchestrating Stephen's death. And when that worked—he went on the rampage. Now, these are your ancestors in the faith—how many of you think they wimped out and kept quiet? That apparently wasn't in their spiritual DNA. Listen to what happened.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. (Acts 8:4-5 NIV)

The persecution, instead of stopping Jesus' mission spread it everywhere these people went. **That** must've been frustrating! And Saul continues to make life miserable for Christians until Jesus knocks him off his horse, blinds him—and has his **full** attention! Then Saul moves just as **passionately** in the other direction—arguing Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. And he barely escapes death—and is finally sent back to Tarsus because of all the death threats against his life.

- c. Luke records one more official outbreak of bloodshed:

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. (Acts 12:1-3 NIV)

-This time Peter's neck was on the line. Ironically, he's sleeping like a baby in prison—when God sends an angel to open the prison and let him out. So, he goes to the all-night prayer vigil and tells them they can stop praying; God has spared his life. Herod didn't fare as well. In his arrogance, he pushed his luck with God and lost.

...Because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. (Acts 12:22-24 NIV)

-The fascinating thing about this story is that every time the blood of believers is poured out—all it does is drive the message of Jesus further and further into the hearts of more and more people. After predicting his own death, Jesus said that our lives are like grains of wheat; when they get planted in the ground they multiply.

- d. Tradition tells us that all of the apostles—except John—were murdered--died martyr's deaths.

*Peter, after being forced to watch his wife get crucified, was himself crucified upside down in Rome.

*Andrew, Peter's brother, was beaten almost to death, then tied by ropes on an X shaped cross in Greece when he died after hanging for 2 days.

*James was beheaded in Jerusalem

*Philip was crucified in Syria

*Bartholomew was beaten, then crucified in Armenia

*Thomas was speared in Greece, then burned in an oven

*Matthew the tax collector was hacked to death with an axe in Ethiopia

*Thaddeus was crucified in Greece

*Simon the Zealot was crucified in Brittainia

*Only John died of natural causes after being exiled on Patmos—a barren chunk of rock in the Mediterranean.

-The irony is that Paul, the one who orchestrated Stephen’s stoning went through incredible suffering. When you read that he, too, was stoned and left for dead, whipped, beaten with rods, and flogged five times—and spent most of his later years in prison—it amazes you that a person could survive all that.

-He writes from prison to Timothy—a young pastor that he trained and mentored—and tells him to come as fast as he can. Luke, the **beloved physician** is there, but Demas, one of his most faithful partners, has deserted him because, as Paul put it, **...he loves the things of this life**. And then Paul writes these words, some of his last:

As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. (2 Timothy 4:6-8 NLT)

-In 66 A.D., Paul—the one responsible for the first Christian martyr—also the one responsible for the faith getting to Gentiles like me--has his head cut off in a Roman prison. He paid for his faith with his life.

4. As I read these accounts, I have **lots** of questions. The most obvious one is—**why does God allow this horrible suffering?** How could it possibly help God’s cause when His best and most faithful witnesses get taken out before they can reach their potential? God **easily** could’ve taken out those who hated, executed and stoned his people, right?

a. I don’t have the answer to that—except to say that God’s love extends to those who love His Son—**and** to those who hate Him. My guess is that Paul knew Stephen well—and that **he** was the one who told Luke, the author, that looking at Stephen’s face was like looking at the face of an angel.

-I don’t know if you’ve ever watched anyone die; I have, and it is an experience you **never** forget. I’m guessing that those words, **Please don’t hold this sin against them**, rang in his ears over and over and over. And the prayer was answered. Saul’s radical transformation to **Paul**—was the single greatest testimony to the power of God in the Early Church.

-In my church in Pennsylvania, I had a guest speaker named Richard Wurmbrandt. Richard wrote a book called, **Tortured For Christ**. As I listened to him talk about the unbelievably **horrible** things he suffered in a prison in Communist Romania—I shuddered. I thought, “I don’t think I could endure that!” But follow the movement of the Church of Jesus—and you realize that the Good News has almost always blossomed in soil soaked in the blood and tears of those who brought it. One author, writing about martyrs, made the comment, “Where blood flows, there the heart grows warmer.”

- b. There's another question that comes up where there's suffering: It's why God answers some people's prayers for protection or healing—and not others. I mean, why did James get beheaded in prison and Peter get miraculously released?

-Some Christian authors or TV preachers say that it has to do with faith, or technique, or how often you pray—or how many people you have praying. When someone dies or isn't healed—the quick answer is, "It's a lack of faith!" Interesting—because Paul—who knew Jesus way better than anyone I've ever heard speak talks about a tormenting situation he faced—and what God said:

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10 NLT)

5. The trail of Jesus Followers through history—is this ever-widening, sticky, crimson swath of blood. When the state-sponsored persecution of Christians began under Nero, it eventually became legal to do pretty much whatever you wanted to believers. I mean, when the Roman Emperor dips people in wax and lights them as torches in his garden—is **anything off limits?** Simply because they loved and followed Jesus, people lost their jobs, their homes, their rights—and even their children.

-Pain was the preferred method of trying to force people **stop** following Jesus and renounce their faith. At one point it got so bad that Roman soldiers would sew up the children of Jesus' followers in fresh animal skins, send them into the arenas, and turn wild animals on them while parents watched. **That** would be more horrible than death of any kind. But—it didn't work. And in 313 A.D., Constantine officially legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan and was baptized as a Christian just before his death.

-Know what's strange? Ultimately, Christianity becoming the state religion had a detrimental effect on the Good News spreading. Good News became **Bad News!** When Christians had the upper hand, it didn't lead to grace—it led to the **same appalling abuse of power**—and some of the ugliest, most unChrist-like centuries the world has seen. People converted to become normal and accepted—this corrupted the heart and the purity of doing what Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciples must take up their cross **daily** and follow me...whoever wants to **save** their live...will **lose** it."

-Suffering has a purifying effect on followers of Jesus. When the Christian missionaries were forced out of the Mao Tse Tung's China in the 40s, they were worried that the church would disappear. Instead, the number of Christ-followers went from approximately a million to, conservative estimate, 100 million! **When blood flows—the heart grows warmer.**

6. I've never known quite what to make of suffering for Jesus. For the most part, in North America, suffering for Jesus is more about being in the minority. Some people who talk about suffering for Jesus—are actually not suffering for Him; they're suffering because they're weird. Or rude. Sometimes people do really, **really** bizarre things—and blame it on God. I don't think that's fair. I've never seen anyone suffer for being too loving, kind, generous, patient, or forgiving.

-When I was a teen—and Bibles were being confiscated in Communist countries, a helmeted, leather clad guy burst into our youth group one night, rounded us up and took all our Bibles. Of course, everyone knew it was Milt Jones—he'd taught most of us in Sunday School. As a devoted driver of Harleys—he always wore a helmet and black leather! He wanted to help us appreciate the freedom we have—and he did!

-Of course, another familiar theme in that era came from Hal Lindsey's book, **The Late, Great Planet Earth**. And the question was, "What if Jesus came back right now—and life as we know it ended?" In the narrow circles I was raised in, getting caught by Jesus in a movie theatre might cause you to be...**Left Behind!** My honest thought then was, "God—could You wait until I have a chance to get married and experience sex!"

-What if Jesus comes back? What if you were to die tonight? I believe the even **bigger** question is—what if Jesus **doesn't** come back right away and instantly finish the job of making all things right? What if I live for another 35 years?

-It really sounds noble to say, "I would be **glad** to lay down my life for Jesus—the One who died for me!" I had a friend in college, Dave Goodwin, who went on to serve in the country of Turkey as a translator. One night, the door opened—and he was gunned down right in front of his wife and kids—and died in a pool of his own blood. I've thought, "What would I do? Would I die with courage?" I hope so. But I think the bigger question, honestly, is, "Will I **give** my life for Jesus—and lay it all on the line if I **don't** die—and live to be old?"

- a. What these early believers **lived** is what they died for? **Jesus is Lord** is more than a cool phrase, the secret handshake among believers. It means—**Jesus is Lord!** Lord over the way I live. Lord of how I work, how I treat others, how much of **His** money I keep for myself. He's Lord of how I keep my promises, how I forgive, how I treat people who hurt me and whether or not I honour Him with my sexuality.

-Most of the early believers did not have a choice about the suffering and oppression they went through. We do. Does it make sense that because no one takes our money, our homes, our freedom or our possessions—that we just live for ourselves—spend pretty much all our money and our times on ourselves—and throw in the occasional prayer to ask for a more convenient life? For me, that doesn't quite compute.

-Jesus asked people who were very much alive—to take up their crosses and follow Him; that if they wrapped their lives around **saving** their lives—they would, in fact, lose them. I'm quite convinced that the burning question for us is

not, “Will I die for Jesus?” It’s will I *live* for Him—the way He asked me to. Where love for Him—and others comes first. The *real* question is, “Instead of trying to rationalize what I do, instead of living pretty much for myself, instead of trying to prove why the Bible *really* doesn’t mean what it says—will I make changes in *my* lifestyle, *my* ethics, *my* values—to reflect that Jesus is *Lord*—and to show that, like Jesus, I *care* about what He cares about?”

- b. I used to think I was pretty much indestructible. What I’ve realized, over time, is that the most difficult thing to kill in me is not my body. A stray germ or wrong turn can do that *quite* effectively! The most difficult thing to kill in me is *also* the most destructive. My pride. My ego. My need to be right, my need to win, my need to come out on top in any argument with my self respect carefully preserved.

-And maybe the real question is not, “Would I die for Christ”—it’s “Would I lay my *ego and pride* on the line for Jesus? Would I inconvenience myself—limit my freedom for Jesus? Would I *die to myself*?” And every single day of my life it becomes clear whether or not I will. And every single day of your life—it becomes clear if *you* will! If my faith in Jesus is worth dying for—then, my sense is that the things that endanger my faith—self, pride, convenience—are worth *dying to as well*. Agreed?

- c. One more messy set of questions I need to be willing to ask myself as a follower of Jesus. These early followers went through massive limitations for the sake of Jesus. In a world where Followers of Jesus were the scum of the earth—it was impossible to get ahead in terms of finances and success as we see it.

-The question I think looms in front of us is, “Will I intentionally limit myself” so that God’s will can be done and God’s Kingdom can come?” Most of us will not have to lay all our freedoms on the line for Jesus. The question is—will I *limit* my freedom for Him? How much I accumulate. Will I limit myself so I can invest in something *way* bigger--*His* purposes in the world? See, I personally think it’s more difficult to limit ourselves—than to have others limit us. That, friends, is a *tough* question I think we need to be prepared to answer. If Jesus is worth *dying* for—is He also worth *living* for?

7. The author of the book of Hebrews, is writing to people who have begun to suffer. It’s not real bad—I mean they’re not shedding blood—but life is *tough!* They were experiencing discrimination, losing jobs, getting mocked, having their possessions confiscated. Living for Jesus had become a *detriment*—a hassle.

-The author of the book repeatedly tells them, “Don’t give up! Don’t give in! What you’re going through—the promises that stand behind you—the future that lies ahead of you—is *worth* any hassle you’re experiencing!” To emphasize what he’s saying, He lists the people who have gone before them. It’s kind of a Hall of Fame in the Bible; people who lived with distinction—and stayed faithful. He says:

But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:35-38 NLT)

-In the very next chapter—the author says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honour beside God's throne. (Hebrews 12:1-2 NLT)

-In some profound way—the crowd of witnesses—all the great people who have gone before us, who have sometimes soaked the ground with their blood—watch from the grandstands of eternity. Some of you have had people who prayed for you—and they've gone ahead of you. My Mom and Dad are there. Peter, Paul, James—all there. Jesus is there. And they're cheering us on. "Don't give up! Don't believe the lies of our world! Don't be stupid with your life! Keep going---Keep going—it's worth it!" So—***will we?***

-The bottom line question ***isn't***, "**Would I die for Jesus?**" No, the real question for us is, "**Will I actually LIVE for Him?**"