

A Place to Stand
[Acts 7:55-60](#)
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“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me - and there was no one left to speak for me.”

That’s a quote attributed to a German Lutheran minister named Martin Niemoller. Niemoller was initially a supporter of the Nazi movement, but eventually he realized his mistake and started protesting against Hitler’s rule, and for this he spent seven years in a Nazi concentration camp. After the war he confessed his deep regret for how long it took for him to publicly stand against the cruelty and evil he saw all around him. It was easy to stay silent when other people were disappearing, when other people were being rounded up and arrested, when other people were being killed, when all these things were happening to people who didn’t look like he did. But staying silent about the injustice he witnessed didn’t protect him. It only ensured that when his own time came, when he was arrested and imprisoned, there was only silence. There was no one left to speak.

I wonder if Saul, at the end of his life, would have recognized his own story in Niemoller’s life. Here in the book of Acts, we meet Saul for the first

time, and he is silent. Worse than silent: He is complicit. Saul claimed to be a devoted follower of the law of God, a student of the great Gamaliel, a famous rabbi renowned for his wisdom and prudence. Gamaliel had already defended the newborn Christian church in front of the Jerusalem council, urging them to not attack or persecute these Christ-followers for their beliefs, but his pupil Saul shows no such restraint or caution, no true devotion to the law. A Christian named Stephen is dragged in front of the council and slandered with false accusations of blasphemy, lies from false witnesses with just enough truth mixed in to make it plausible, and when Stephen defends himself, the council is so enraged that they execute him on the spot. And Saul approves of everything. He doesn't get his own hands dirty - he stands there, guarding over the coats, but Acts makes clear that Saul agreed whole-heartedly with Stephen's death, and he followed that crime up by leading a great wave of persecution against the church, going from house to house, dragging people off to prison, doing everything in his power to destroy the church of Jesus Christ.

And it's not that hard to understand why. It's not as if Saul and the rest of the council didn't believe in law and order and justice - they did. They knew what it was like to be oppressed, to be abused and treated unfairly by an unjust government. They were living under the dominion of the Roman Empire; they had to endure the random cruelties and miseries of Roman "justice" every day, and they hated the Romans for it. Every time the Romans mistreated or tortured or executed a good, faithful citizen of

Jerusalem, a faithful worshipper of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they would condemn Rome for its cruelty and injustice and evil, but as far as Saul was concerned, Stephen wasn't one of the good guys. As far as Saul was concerned, Stephen and the rest of the Christians were evil. They had abandoned their true heritage and faith to follow a man who had been publicly repudiated by the leaders of Jerusalem and executed by the Roman Empire, and even though their leader was dead, these stubborn insurgents were still insisting that he was alive, they were spreading the story that he had come back to life, that God had raised him from the dead. So it was easy for Saul to let his standards of fairness and decency slide just a little bit when it came to these troublemakers. So what if the accusations were a little dodgy, the witnesses a little crooked? So what if the execution technically exceeded their legal authority? As far as Saul was concerned, Stephen didn't deserve any rights or protection, he didn't deserve a fair trial, he didn't deserve to be protected by all the niceties of the law. He deserved death. Saul is so convinced that he's in the right that he's willing to become just as much of a tyrant as the worst of the Romans. In order to defend the law of Moses, Saul is prepared to break it. Saul chooses to stand for lies over truth, power over righteousness, vengeance over justice, and Stephen pays the price, Stephen pays with his life.

But Stephen doesn't stand alone. Throughout the sham trial, throughout the vicious attacks on his character, the lies from false witnesses, through the rage and torment that Stephen endures, he is not

alone. The Holy Spirit is with him, filling him with strength and light so that his face shines like a citizen of heaven, and his eyes are opened to see Jesus Christ, standing at the right hand of Almighty God. When Stephen stands accused, Jesus Christ stands with him. When Stephen stands condemned, Jesus Christ stands with him. When Stephen's life is taken from him, Jesus Christ receives his spirit and brings him into the presence of God. Everything that Stephen endures, the lies, the cruelty, the torture, even death, this is exactly what Jesus himself went through in his own trial and crucifixion, and now Jesus stands with Stephen in his hour of need, Jesus stands with Stephen through death and right into the kingdom of heaven. Saul thinks he's standing in the right, he thinks he's standing up for what God truly wants, but God stands with Stephen. With the outcast, the condemned, the persecuted, that's where Jesus Christ stands, not with Saul, but with Stephen.

Now, this story might sound like something very unfamiliar and strange to us, hearing it today in our comfortable church in our comfortable country so many centuries after Stephen and Saul stood on opposite sides of the truth on that day in Jerusalem. But this story is still being played out, every day, in places all around this world, in places that are closer than we think. As Christians we are so quick to condemn injustice when it happens to us. We are so quick to feel violated and cheated by the smallest indignities, we will mobilize an army of outrage when some privilege we've long enjoyed as the dominant cultural group in our society gets rolled back

the slightest little bit, we are more than willing to man the barricades against secularism and pluralism and whatever other enemies we imagine are out to get us. But every day, all around the world, there are Christians whose lives are in danger, who know that following Jesus Christ can be dangerous, following Jesus Christ can cost you your life. As Christians in this comfortable country, in this comfortable church, we are called to remember and stand with our brothers and sisters all around this world who are suffering for their faith, who are facing injustice and cruelty and torture and death for no reason but that they belong to Jesus Christ.

But we can't stop there. We can't just defend people who look like us, who act like us, who worship like us, who believe what we believe. If our commitment to justice and love only extends as far as the boundaries of the church, then we're no better than Saul, who would defend his fellow Israelites against Roman injustice while persecuting the church in the same breath. If we believe in and follow a God who stands with the condemned, with the outcast, with the persecuted and oppressed, then we need to stand with them too, no matter what they look like, no matter how different from us they might be, wherever there is injustice, wherever there is cruelty, there the church is called to stand and speak. When we see hatred and prejudice aimed at Jews or Muslims, when we see immigrants vilified and condemned for their race or their faith, when we see the powerful and wealthy use lies and half-truths to oppress the weak, we cannot stay silent. We cannot stand to the side. The church is called to stand with the

oppressed and speak truth to power, to oppose every kind of injustice wherever we find it. And we don't do this just because we're afraid that these forces might one day be turned against us. We don't speak for others just so that one day there might be someone to speak on our behalf. We stand with the weak and the outcast and the oppressed because when we were weak, when we were cast out, when we were oppressed by the power of sin, when we were still lost in the depths of evil and death, Jesus Christ stood with us. Jesus Christ left the glory of the kingdom of heaven and his place of honour at the right hand of Almighty God, he entered into this world, he came to stand with us, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We stand with the outcasts and the oppressed because that's where Christ still stands, that's where we meet Jesus Christ.

And that will take courage. It takes courage to walk across the courtroom, away from the places of power and judgment, and stand in the prisoner's box alongside Stephen. It takes courage to speak up when we'd rather stay silent, to risk our own comfort and power by standing with those at the bottom. But we need to remember that we already know how this story ends. We know how Saul's story ends. We know that Jesus Christ is going to meet him on the road to Damascus and speak to him and claim him as his own and transform him from a weapon of fury against the church into the greatest evangelist the church will ever know. We know that Saul will spend the rest of his life travelling around the world, teaching and preaching about Jesus, telling anyone and everyone who will listen about what God

has accomplished in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And when Saul ends up back in Jerusalem, he will be arrested and brought before this exact same council, the same men who he so enthusiastically supports here as they murder Stephen will one day stand in judgment over Saul, they will bring these same false accusations against Saul and condemn him for blasphemy and call for his death. We know that one day Saul's faith in Jesus Christ will cost him his life, and on that day, Jesus Christ will stand with him, just as Christ stood with Stephen. And it's not just Saul's story. It's our story too. We know that the kingdom of heaven is coming here, because our eyes have been opened to see Jesus Christ, to see him standing at the right hand of Almighty God, to see him standing with Stephen, with all those who are afraid, with all those who are oppressed, we know that Christ's kingdom is coming, it cannot be stopped, and all those who stand against it will fall, all their power and prestige and wealth and influence cannot stand against the power of Almighty God in Jesus Christ. Jesus wins. The kingdom comes, and when it comes, every form of injustice, every form of cruelty, every form of evil will be utterly vanquished, and truth and peace will reign forever and ever. That kingdom is coming, and as the church of Jesus Christ, as citizens of that kingdom, we have been called to proclaim that kingdom here and now, in all we say and do, so that the world will know the Good News of Jesus Christ, they will experience his justice and love, wherever we go, wherever we stand, there the love and grace and power of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, will be proclaimed in word and

deed, and in our lives, God's kingdom will be revealed. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.