

Sunday 24th March 2024 - Sunday Service

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Date: 24 March 2024

Preacher: Johan DeJong

[0 : 00] Good, well done. Hopefully you've had a chance to draw breath. Let's just pray shall we?! As we handle this part of God's word. Lord we thank you. We thank you that you are here! We thank you that you are here with us. We thank you that you know the condition of our hearts. We thank you that you know the weeks that we've had. And we thank you that you have appointed this part of your word for our encouragement to help us to grow. So we pray that we come to you now with hands open ready to receive the food that you have prepared for us.

In Jesus name. Amen. What do you do when something really horrible happens to you? How do you deal with it? I don't mean when you stub your toe, you know, or when you wonder if your husband or wife is angry with you. I mean something happens that leaves you damaged.

Or maybe even dying. What's life taught you about that kind of suffering? And how to deal with it? Well if you live in the West, then the chances are the answer to that question, what has life taught you about dealing with that kind of suffering, is not much.

Because since we have, as a society, decided to leave God behind in search of personal freedom, we're actually terrible at understanding what suffering is, what it means, dealing with it.

And that's why, you know, when we talk with other people around us, we find ourselves borrowing from other cultures. So lots of people talk about karma, you know, what goes around comes around, that's why.

[1 : 53] Or you find people have no concept of a meaning of suffering, and instead what they do is to say, well this life is all there is, so we just need to concentrate on making this world the best place there is. And if you suffer, I'm sorry.

Our culture's meaning of life, its highest value is personal freedom, isn't it? It's my personal freedom to make the choices I want to make, and then my identity I build around those choices.

That's the basis of individualism. And Tim Keller points out, really helpfully, that personal freedom as a way of life crumbles in the face of suffering.

When you get ill, suddenly you can't go out anymore and do what you want, can you? When you discover you have dyslexia or chronic anxiety or a degenerative condition, suddenly you can't make all your dreams come true anymore.

When your true love cheats on you and walks out and leaves you with kids, suddenly your life is a lot less free through no choice of your own. And if your identity is built around your personal freedom, then that will crumble too.

[3 : 23] So me being free to choose whatever I want to do has no answer whatsoever to suffering. And that's just not good enough, is it? We can't live like that.

No wonder we get headlines like this one from this week. Just in case you can't see the slides, there's something called the World Happiness Report, and it came in this week.

And it's discovered that young people in the West are becoming unhappier, despite never being more free and having more choices than today. What does all of that have to do with this?

Well, in today's passage, in Stephen's words and in his death, Jesus offers us a way of life and an identity which suffering cannot touch. Because it's a way of life and an identity based on something that nobody can take away from us.

And that's God's love for us in Jesus. In case you were wondering whether I was going to go through this verse by verse, the answer is no. I'm not going to be doing that.

[4 : 33] We're focusing on chapter 7, verse 51, mostly through to chapter 8, verse 3. So please do have those pages of the passage open. And the first thing we're going to do is we're going to look at what Stephen says and what happens to him.

And we're going to see that he looks at history. You've probably noticed that. And he looks at humanity. And he does that in order to diagnose the condition of the human heart.

So that's what we're doing first. Chapter 7, verse 1. What to his accusers? Ask him, High Priest, our Stephen, are these charges true?

Why are they so upset? Did you notice this as we were going through? Why are the Jewish authorities so upset? Well, they are so upset because they think Stephen is saying that the two things which are most precious to them, that's the temple in Jerusalem and the Mosaic law, are not the be-all and end-all.

In fact, they think he's saying that they are pointless. Now, if that was happening today, somebody would probably be shouting, hate crime, hate crime. Because you're denigrating something that somebody else holds to be precious.

[5 : 49] So what does Stephen say in response? And why should we care? It's a good question to ask, isn't it? Well, if you were following along, you'll realise that this really is remarkable, what Stephen does.

Because he's in the dock. He's been dragged in front of the court, the Sanhedrin, and he's been put in the dock. But he ends up doing the prosecution. Did you notice that? And he doesn't shout.

He speaks respectfully. Fathers, brothers, that's how he addresses them. And he knows his history, he shows that. But he's bold.

And his words, basically, are an expose, a revealing of God's dealing with humanity and humanity's dealing with God. So what about the temple, then?

How does Stephen respond to that charge? That he hates the temple. Verse 44 of chapter 7. Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness.

[6 : 51] And verse 45. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors, under Joshua, brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. Stephen is saying God's people had the tabernacle, which was the precursor to the temple, the kind of the template for the temple, wasn't it?

And where did they have it? Not in Jerusalem. In the wilderness. In the wilderness. And it moved about with them. So it turns out that God has never been confined to the temple.

No, you don't need the temple. Or a church building. Or a special time of day. Or a special time of the week to be with God. And God's dealings in history with humanity shows that.

In fact, God's prophets even said it. Do you notice that Stephen quotes from the prophets? Here we are. Verse 49.

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? God has never been confined to the temple. So why do the Jews keep on about it?

[7 : 56] Why is Stephen referring to this? Well, he's putting his finger on the fact that human beings, even religious ones, prefer God in his box. See, if he's in the temple, or he's just in church, then we can control him, can't we?

Then he'll only bother us when we come through the doors. Because that's his office and he doesn't really ever go very far from it. And so we say to ourselves, well, I'll make you a deal, God. I'll come to church and you'll sort me out.

And I'll keep the rest of the week. But that God is too small, says Stephen. What about the law? The other point that the Jews were upset about.

Don't we need to follow some kind of code to keep in God's good books? Isn't that the way it works? Verse 53. Stephen's at the end of his speech and he says, You've betrayed and murdered him.

You who have received the law that was given through angels, but have not obeyed it. It was given by angels, so yes, it's important, says Stephen.

[9 : 07] Of course it is. The trouble is, we can't keep it. And where does that leave us? And maybe that doesn't bother you.

Because you don't believe in him anyway. So you don't need to worry. Well then, of course, if there's no judge that you need to please, no law that you need to keep, there's also nobody to put wrongs right at the end of the day.

Still, we've got our freedom, haven't we? We can then decide what is right and what is wrong, what is good. And then we try to do that, right? That's how personal freedom works.

We have no faith in God. I wonder if you keep a journal. I used to. It's getting increasingly tricky.

But if I got one of my old journals and I read it out to you, I can guarantee you that two things would become really clear from what I wrote in my journal. One is that I have certain expectations of other people.

[10:12] And the other is that I can't keep them myself. See, even when we write the law, we can't keep it. Even when we decide what's good, we can't do it.

At least not all the time. Human beings, says Stephen, even religious ones, can't live up to their own standards. And that's a problem, isn't it?

But surely, if God is a loving God, the way you say he is, he'll help me out. He'll put people around me to help me live a good life.

He'll send someone who can give me that forgiveness. Well, of course, then, you know, we are talking about faith. But yes, yes, God does send helpers, doesn't he?

Says Stephen. Verse 52. Here is what we do with the helpers. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one.

[11:22] And now you have betrayed and murdered him. The answer, says Stephen, is yes. God does send people to help you and speak to you and lead you in the right way. Over and over again, he does it.

Moses. Joseph. Jesus. And we reject them. And worse, Stephen repeats that accusation that we've heard Peter make twice already in Acts.

Did you notice that? God sent the righteous one. The only one who can actually measure up to the good expectations of God. The only one who can keep the law and therefore die the death of an innocent person on our behalf and then offer us that forgiveness.

And what does humanity do? Humanity kills him. Human beings, says Stephen, even religious ones reject the one person who God sent to help them.

Human beings, says Stephen, even religious ones. Human beings, says Stephen, even religious ones. So where does that leave us? Well, Stephen says it, doesn't he, in verse 51.

[12:32] You stiff-necked people. Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. It just means hard. You are just like your ancestors.

You always resist the Holy Spirit. So here is Stephen's diagnosis of the human heart. The Jewish people, who all the way through the Old Testament represent us all, have stiff necks and stubborn hearts.

We don't want to listen. And so the only solution is that we receive a new heart. If you haven't yet, you're here this morning, can I invite you to do what Stephen is helping us to do and look in.

Look in to your own heart. Are you really able to say that you keep even your own rules and that you really don't need Jesus? Or if you're a Christian, are there some areas of your heart that are actually still closed to God?

You know, it's not church, so he's not there. He's still in his box. Ultimately, what we need to take from what Stephen says and does is not that we must all be like Stephen.

[13:58] That was not the point of what Stephen was saying, was it? What we need to do with this is listen to Stephen when he says, listen to Jesus, the one that God sent, and don't be like Israel.

So how do we get from that diagnosis of our hearts to where Stephen is? Stephen, who's got such a read on history and such a view into the human heart and such courage to stand up against the combined might and wisdom of all of the authorities in the establishment and look death in the eye and still tell it to him straight?

How can we get there? We need to look up. Stephen has something which suffering can't take away.

We started talking about it at the beginning, didn't we? See, he isn't relying on his personal freedoms. Where are they at the moment? Well, he's in chains, in the court. So they're severely limited.

And very soon, they're going to be taken away completely when he's taken out and stoned. He doesn't need those freedoms to deal with the injustice and suffering that he's experiencing now.

[15:16] He doesn't need those freedoms to stand up for the truth. What does he do in the courtroom? He looks up. And what does he see?

Verse 55. 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.

He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God in the royal throne room. He looks up from the earthly courtroom and he sees into the heavenly courtroom.

And who is there? His lawyer. His advocate. Jesus. Jesus telling God the Father why he should accept Stephen into heaven that very day.

Because that's why Jesus is standing rather than sitting. Why should God the Father accept Stephen into heaven? Because Jesus loves Stephen so much that he has paid the penalty and served the sentence for Stephen's failures.

[16 : 25] And now, he can stand up and tell the judge there is no case to answer. Stephen is free. Not free the way that we think of freedom, personal freedom.

We've already seen that that doesn't help us. No, he's really free. See, he has a hope in God and a love from God that no suffering or struggle can take away.

And that frees him to share that love and hope with others. Even in the courtroom, moments before his death. That's how the Holy Spirit empowers Stephen to do what he does.

That's the freedom we need. That's the freedom that God offers us all in the Lord Jesus. Now, if this was a fairy tale, you know what would happen next, don't you? The entire courtroom would fall to their knees and recognize that Stephen was right.

But that's not what happens. Because the Christian life is not a fairy tale. Let's look at verse 57. As this, they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

[17 : 41] And meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. So like Joseph and Moses and Jesus before him, Stephen and his message are rejected.

And that's there as a warning. A warning for us who have stubborn hearts. Don't be like Israel. Again. And again, the application is not that we should look up at Stephen, look up to him and think, wow, what a human being.

I'll try and be more like him. What the Lord wants us to do is look up to Jesus just like Stephen did. Because if Jesus can make Stephen feel so secure in such suffering and difficulty, then he can do that for us too.

If Jesus has shown to Stephen the depth of God's love for him, then God can show that to us too. Look up.

Maybe you're terribly hard-headed and you're thinking, what a waste. Who did he convince?

[19 : 02] What did he achieve with a noble death like that? And let's look at the effect, the effect that that suffering has on a heart that has looked up and been cured.

Because we tend to worship personal freedom in our time and in our day, we think of suffering as a delay, don't we, or an interruption, or maybe even the end.

But Jesus doesn't. Think of his suffering on the cross. Shows it, doesn't it? So what happens when someone who knows that they are loved by God and that nothing can take that love away from them, who has understood Jesus' suffering, what happens when they suffer?

Well, let's think about Stephen. Where did he start? He's become a believer. If you were here last week, you'll see that he became a deacon, somebody appointed to love and serve others.

And if you're paying attention at the beginning of this passage, you'll see that he's now working miracles in God's name. And if you were paying attention in the passage, you'll realize he's not a bad speaker either. Because if you could say all of that off the top of your head, you're doing a better job than I could do.

[20 : 23] And then he looks up to heaven and he goes to his death with a heart full of love and forgiveness for those people who are killing him. So that man has grown, hasn't he?

And he becomes glorious. I'm pretty sure Stephen didn't have the face of an angel when he was born. Just based on my experience of my own children.

We don't come looking like that, do they? But as he looks up now, his face is glorious because it is reflecting the glory that he sees in heaven.

You see his final words? Just like the words of the Lord Jesus on the cross. This man's suffering has been turned into his glory.

And what effect do those words and that suffering have on a young man who stands by and sees it all? Called Saul. Well, he becomes the Apostle Paul.

[21 : 29] And if you read the Apostle Paul's letters, you'll realize that he develops the themes in Stephen's sermon into a message of hope that he shares and that develops into a church and more

churches into a work that is still going on today.

All because of what he has seen and heard from Stephen and then how the Lord Jesus applies it to his heart when he meets the Lord Jesus. and what happens to the church?

What happens to the church as a result of Stephen's suffering? Chapter 8, verse 1.

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. So the result is that the church spreads and grows in a way that without Stephen's death would not have been possible.

It goes outward to Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus predicted and asked back in chapter 1, verse 8. More glory, not for Stephen, but for God.

[22 : 45] And that is ultimately because Stephen's suffering is patterned on and it points to Jesus' suffering, which God turns into glory.

Do we have that power, that knowledge of the love of God, which enables our suffering to be transformed into glory too? Do we have the spirit that Stephen had, the spirit of Jesus in our hearts, so that as we look up to him, we will have the power to endure in suffering.

And we can be a witness to God's grace, just like Stephen was. Looks like a defeat, doesn't it, for the early church? Heavenly man is lost to the earth, but the seeds, the seeds of victory are already sown.

The borders of the kingdom of good news expand once again. And that's how God works, turning suffering into glory. And all we need to do to be a part of that, to have a hope and a love that suffering cannot touch, is to keep looking up.

Let me pray. Lord, we thank you for Stephen. We thank you for working in his heart and in his life.

[24 : 09] We thank you that his gaze, not just in that moment, but in his life, was fixed on you. We thank you that when his personal freedom was taken away, first temporarily and then permanently, his hope was not taken away.

Thank you, Lord, for transforming his suffering into glory. Thank you most of all for the suffering of the Lord Jesus, which you've turned into glory. and we pray you will do the same with ours as we look up to you and put our faith in you.

In Jesus' name, amen.