

Stephen's story and the mission of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] So as we turn to look at Stephen's story, and as we think about the mission of Jesus, I just want to say again that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, is a brilliant historian.

I know some of us are into history, and nowadays if you read a modern history book, or you listen to a history podcast, what you'll get is that they will show a significant national or global event through the eyes of an individual.

So you'll learn something of the significance of the outbreak of World War I through the diary of a Norwegian school teacher, or through the meetings that a British ambassador had in Vienna.

And Dr. Luke is way ahead of his time, because as he tells us about the story of Jesus' mission, he does it by focusing on one individual, Stephen.

He's recognized to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He's recognized to be a man of faith. He is full of grace and power.

[1 : 0 6] And Dr. Luke uses this one man to give us a window on the mission of Jesus at this particular stage. He's been growing in Jerusalem, but there's growing opposition, and now it's about to spread from Jerusalem, as Jesus promised.

And so in his story, we discover something about the challenges, and how the first church faced those challenges. We see again something of their bold communication of truth in the face of hate. And we discover something about the pattern that the Christian life took from the earliest days. And what I hope that we'll get from this, so there's a lot to cover, but I hope that we'll get three key components of the ongoing mission of Jesus.

This is where it's relevant for us today. We'll see the significance of service and mercy. We'll think about the importance of speaking truth.

And we'll also learn something of the importance of seeing Jesus' glory and following Jesus' pattern. So that's where we're going this morning. And we're going to begin by thinking about Stephen's service.

[2 : 2 5] Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. Now, picture this scenario. You walk into Becclew.

It's a standard Sunday morning. But on this occasion, you have to show your passport. And when you show your passport, the church is then segregated.

So we put the Scots over here, and we put the Americans over here, and Asians are at the back, and Europeans are at the front. And then we begin to relate to people differently depending on their background.

Or it's after the service, and you have a need that you want to share with one of our deacons and our elders, and they turn to you and say, Sorry, I need to focus my attention on my own culture right now.

You can just wait in line. That'd be an awful situation, wouldn't it? That'd be a terrible picture of the church. And thankfully, that's not what we're experiencing this morning.

[3 : 3 3] By God's grace, we want to give a loving welcome to everybody. But as we get into Acts chapter 6, we're getting this little glimpse into the reality that the church of Jesus is growing really quickly, and there are growing pains.

That a growing church is also a messy church. That this church in Acts chapter 6 is multicultural, and there are multiple needs, and it's complicated to meet those needs, and some people are being left behind.

And the problem that arises is actually more than just basic needs. It's asking fundamental questions. Is it possible that any local church of Jesus can be a truly mixed group?

Can the power of Jesus break down traditional, cultural, social barriers so that there is genuine unity and love on display?

Acts chapter 6 really matters. Verse 1 tells us what the problem is. There's clearly poverty. There's widows who are struggling to survive.

[4 : 55] And while the widows from a Jewish background, Hebraic background, they're being cared for. Those from a Greek background, when they come to the church food bank, they're missing out.

There's a lack of organization. People are falling through the cracks. And so this comes to the attention of the apostles. And they have a solution. With two distinct, but very much related ideas. Look with me at your Bibles. The first solution, there in verse 2, is this. It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

They continue in verse 4. We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. So the apostles, they're going to keep praying. And they're going to keep on teaching the gospel.

Because Jesus called them to do that. And also because they understand that as the message of Jesus' sacrificial love and generous grace is being taught to Christians, that's what promotes mercy for all kinds of people.

[6 : 11] So that's one answer to their problem. We need to keep hearing the gospel. And we need to keep praying. But the second answer is that the church should choose wise, spirit-filled men who will organize care for the poor.

It's there in verse 3. We will turn this responsibility over to them. And so the church from the beginning understands that the mission of Jesus requires both words, gospel words, but also actions.

And they both matter and each serve the other. Just as an aside, it's why churches like ours have elders and deacons. Those are both spiritual roles.

While the elders focus principally on word and prayer, spiritual, pastoral matters, the deacons serve us in practical material mercy matters. And they both belong together for the sake of the church fellowship.

What's the outcome of this proposal? Well, we discover in verse 5, it pleases the whole group. And so the church chooses seven men.

[7 : 24] Interestingly, at least a number of them are from a Greek background, making sure there's good representation. And Stephen is highlighted, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

And as they are set aside for caring for the poor and extending mercy, verse 7, the word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

The church keeps growing. Former opponents of Jesus, the priests, are now placing their faith in Jesus as Lord. And so Luke shows us something of the servant heart of Stephen, as the head of the seven.

And what he does, is he makes the love of God visible. And what happens, is that some of those fractures in the church community, they are healed.

And the effect is that, that word and action in the church, they line up. And so we have this wonderful moment where, outsiders, people from Greek culture, former opponents, together, they're experiencing Jesus' love within the church.

[8 : 41] The power of the gospel, the power of the good news of Jesus, and his saving work, is again being put on display. So that says to us, that the church on mission, must practice service, and mercy.

One objection that's sometimes made to Christianity, goes along lines like these, aren't Christians all hypocrites? Or maybe someone will look at the bad record of the church, times where the church has been guilty of abuse, or exclusion.

Now how do we respond to that? Well, sometimes one response, is honestly to hold our hands up. That through history, and in the present moment, the church of the Lord Jesus, well often does fail to represent Jesus well.

We know our own hearts. We can be, the church in the past, has at times been a poor advert, for a God of love, and grace.

But there is another response. And it's interesting, isn't it, that many people now, are rediscovering, that actually Christianity, has had a massively good influence, on the Western world.

[10 : 02] And so we can lovingly point people, towards the goodness, that followers of Jesus, the Christian church has brought. So whether we're thinking about, health care, or education, whether we look at statistics, that show that Christians are, on average, more generous, spend more time

giving to charity, and serving others.

Whether we think about, the church from the earliest days, and securing rights for women, and for the marginalized. Whether we think about, that Christian impact, on the ending of slavery. We can see, that when Christians, are following Jesus pattern, genuinely the church, does make the world, a better place.

Not perfectly, but does. Think about the life of Jesus, the one we're called to follow. What was the accusation, against Jesus? Not that he didn't care enough, it was that he cared too much.

Jesus, you care too much, for the poor. You're spending too much, with the weak, and the excluded, and the marginalized. That's our model. And especially, as we understand, the death of Jesus, as the answer, to our spiritual poverty, our need of mercy, from God.

And so, the church of Jesus, must always be, a community of loving service, and not just, looking after, my kind of people. You'll think back, to that, segregation model.

[11 : 35] Not just forming, cozy cliques, while I notice the people, who are like me. We see that too much, in our world. We see the tribalism. You know, let's cancel, and exclude those, who think differently, to us.

It's the negative side, I think, of rising nationalism. The church, has an invitation, an opportunity, to show, a different way. And we need to both, show and experience, the wide-reaching love, of the Lord Jesus.

The one who showed, and invites us, to show mercy, to whoever, in whatever situation. I would suggest, that's the kind of community, that we all want.

The kind of community, we all want, for ourselves, and for the people, around us. The kind that would, show love, for our neighbor. That would welcome, people all the way in.

Where everybody, would be seen, and noticed. So let's pray, that by God's grace, this church, would be that church. For one another, for our local community, for our city.

[12 : 47] Well that's Stephen's, service, but we need to, keep pressing on, to think about, Stephen's speech, which takes up, so much of, chapter seven.

Just to make the observation, that to understand, the power of words, and the power of speech, especially those spoken, in a particular, historic moment, we need to know, the context.

Christ. So maybe we have, at least some of us, will be familiar with, you know, Churchill's famous speech, you know, we shall defend, our island nation, whatever the cost may be, and we shall fight them, on the beaches, and so on, we shall never surrender.

Those words, need a context, to understand the power. And here is, you know, Churchill, powerfully, faced with the threat, of Nazi Germany, calling the nation, to courage, and sacrifice, in the face of global war.

Now we're going to get, to Stephen's sermon, in a moment, what was his context? Because I think, to see his context, helps us to understand, his courage, and sacrifice. It's there, in the end of, chapter six.

[14 : 02] And we discover, in verses eight to ten, he's being opposed, by the religious leaders, of his day, but they can't stand up, to his wisdom, because his wisdom, comes from the spirit of God. And we discover, that just like Jesus, he is falsely accused, people are getting together, to make false claims, that he's guilty, of speaking blasphemy.

In verse 12, he is seized, and placed under arrest, by the religious officials. So by the time, we get to chapter seven, and the high priest, saying to Stephen, are these charges, true?

what follows, will determine, whether he lives, or dies. And so, Dr. Luke, records, the courage, and the sacrifice, of Stephen, the follower of Jesus, as he speaks, the truth.

And it reminds us, that in the mission, of the church, and we've been seeing, in this the book of Acts, the church, both grows, and is opposed.

That the message, of God's love, and grace, through Jesus, is both accepted, by some, and rejected, by others. And here, in this most hostile, territory, the Holy Spirit, enables Stephen, to speak.

[15 : 21] And what I want to do, I don't want to look, at the sermon, in great detail, but just to recognize, that what Stephen does, is he follows, the sweep, of Old Testament, Israel, beginning with Abraham, the father of faith, going all the way, down to the prophets.

And he weaves, into that story, two important themes, two threads, you can trace, throughout. One, is the theme, of redemption.

God's love, reaches people, outside Israel. But the other thread, is rejection. That pattern, that God sends, messengers, his messengers, and his message, is often rejected.

And it's an amazing, analysis, in the heat of the moment. And it's a trend, that we see, continue through, church history. Right now, today, there are hundreds, of millions, of followers of Jesus. Every country, that we could go to, every culture, that's represented. And millions, tens of millions, of them, are facing, hatred and persecution. And at the same time, there are millions, of people, in the world today, who have turned, their back, on Jesus, and God's message, of salvation.

[16 : 33] What we see, in chapter seven, is a trend, we see continue. Well let's trace, the redemption, theme together. Thinking about, how God, calls people, from outside, of Israel.

Look at verse two, as he introduces, Abraham. Where was Abraham, this ex-pagan, when he was called, by God? He was in, Mesopotamia, modern day, Iraq, when he receives, God's promises. Good news, of redemption, comes, to somebody, who's on the outside. The next character, of significance, is Joseph. Look at verse nine, here is Joseph, he sold as a slave, into Egypt.

But what's true, of Joseph in Egypt? God was with him. God gave Joseph wisdom. God enabled him, to gain the good will, of Pharaoh, so he's raised, up to the palace.

He is outside, of Israel, but God is with him. The next character, Moses. Moses, we discover, has been chosen, as God's rescuer, while he was, in Egypt.

[17 : 49] And then, as he has to run, from Egypt, where does God, meet with him? Outside Israel, Mount Sinai, to announce, God's future, rescue.

And the point, that Stephen, wants to introduce, and Jesus did it as well, is that God's grace, reaches beyond, barriers. One of the things, that people hated, about Jesus.

That God, is in the business, of rescuing people, of restoring people, to peace, with himself, and that's not, limited to certain, kind of people, in certain, kind of places.

Takes us back, to the story, of the Greek widows. There was mercy, from Jesus, for them. So, Stephen's sermon, really drives home, the fact, that God has always, been pleased, to surprise people, with his grace.

But there's another theme, a negative theme, and it's the theme, of rejection. So, we read, about Joseph, in verse 9, the brother, who was sold, into slavery.

[18 : 52] Why? His brothers, were jealous, of the fact, that God, was going to use him, to become a person, of significance. And then, he focuses, a lot of attention, on the story, of Moses.

Moses, who was called, to be God's rescuer, and Moses, who seemed to experience, a lifetime, of being rejected, and who made you, ruler and judge, over us? The people say, repeatedly, climaxing there, in verse 39, our ancestors, refused to obey him, instead, they rejected him.

And the climax, of the sermon, that we read, that's where the real, emotional heat, comes, from Stephen. Because what does he say, to that current generation? He says, they're stiff-necked.

He says, that they are following, the same pattern. Just as people, in the past, rejected God's messengers, killed the prophets, that said, Jesus was coming, he turns to them, and says, and you actually, killed God's righteous one.

It's as if he says to them, you have great privilege, but you failed, in your responsibility. Because they don't recognize, that in Jesus, God was bringing, redemption.

[20 : 13] They don't recognize, Jesus is God's son, the righteous one. And so, Stephen speaks, this powerful, speech, that is full, of grace and truth.

And it says, to us today, that the church, on mission, must speak, the truth, in love. We must speak, about God's grace, to us, in Jesus.

the one who is sent, to deal, with the sin, that we cannot deal with, by ourselves. The one who has come, in love, to restore us, to relationship, with God.

The one who, gives us this, loving invitation, into the kingdom, that has no end. And it's, it's our confidence, in the gospel, of God's grace, that gives us, the impetus, for church mission.

It's what gives us, the encouragement, to invite people, to come to Jesus, in faith, today. To understand, that just as was true, for Abraham, Jesus is still, the one who speaks to, and seeks, after, those who naturally, are not seeking him.

[21 : 35] Maybe, this is your story, or you know someone, in this experience, I woke up one day, and I just had to, get to a church. I hadn't read, the Bible for years, but then I just felt like, I had to pick it up, and read, and discover about Jesus.

It's because Jesus, is looking to seek, and to save. The same story, that was true of Joseph, is still true, for people today, that Jesus, reaches down, to rescue those, in dark, situations.

those who would testify, I have tried everything, and I'm not happy, and my life's a mess. I've chased pleasure, and I've come up empty.

Lord, it's the story of many, it was, it was a failure, a disaster, a bad diagnosis, that brought me to pray, and to seek God, and to receive his love.

Jesus is still doing that. Jesus is still working, the way he worked, in Moses' life, shaping our circumstances, to call people, to himself.

[22 : 48] Maybe you moved, to a new neighborhood, or a new school, or to university, and your colleague, or your flatmate, or your neighbor, or the people, that sat next to you, they were Christians, and they invited you, to read the Bible, with them, and they loved you.

Maybe that's what's happening, in your story right now. Jesus is still working, still looking to redeem, and show grace, and so the invitation, is both, if you're not yet, following Jesus, come to Jesus.

And for those of us, who are Christians, let's go for Jesus, to bring this message. But speaking the truth, in love, love, also involves, the church, sounding a loving warning, that rejecting Jesus, is serious.

Some of us, a few Saturdays ago, were at the, the Solace conference here, maybe you'll remember, the quote, from Pendulet, a famous magician, who's also, a kind of prominent, atheist. He spoke about the time, where one of his, audience members, at the end of, one of his, comedy magic shows, came up to him, and gave him the gift, of a Bible. He was not, a friend of Christianity, but, but Pendulet, spoke about, the respect that he had, for that man, in honoring him, by giving him a Bible.

[24 : 15] And he went on to say, I've always said, I don't respect people, who don't, proselytize. It might seem quite shocking.

But he went on to say, if you believe, there is a heaven, and hell, and people could be, going to hell, and not getting, eternal life, if you decide, not to tell them, because of social, awkwardness.

He said, that's a profoundly, unloving thing to do. Amazing words. Stephen, sounded, a loving, warning.

And it still echoes today, the warning of, verse 51, pride, being stiff-necked, refusing to follow, the evidence, about Jesus, as the son of God, and savior.

He warned them, about resisting, the Holy Spirit, what does that look like? Maybe it looks like, ignoring our conscience. Maybe it looks like, refusing to take seriously, the teaching of the Bible.

[25 : 32] Maybe it's when you hear, a sermon in, a church, and you're convicted, but you don't act on it, and it's soon forgotten about. And ultimately, Stephen warns, about the danger, of rejecting Jesus, rejecting God's righteous one.

Jesus, the one who came, to demonstrate to us, the love of God. The only one, who can forgive our guilt, and our shame, who can bring us back, to God, bring us into the world, and the life, that we all want.

To say, like the crowds, in Jesus' day, away with him, we won't have him, as our king. That's a profoundly, serious thing.

And recognizing that, we urge each one of us, to come to the Lord Jesus, to turn from sin, to trust in him.

And that we would be a church, who would speak the truth, in love. One last thing, to say, about Stephen, as he gives us an insight, into the church of Jesus, on mission, we need to think about, Stephen's stoning, and what it teaches us.

[26 : 52] Because as he draws attention to, so Stephen is the first, martyr, the first person killed, for faith in Jesus. And we see, see something of the, the horror of that, but we also, at the same time, see the beauty of his life, on display.

And I would suggest, that we're being presented, with two, opposite world views. We're seeing the outcome, of two very different, reactions to Jesus, being followed through.

So we have the enemies, and the opponents of Stephen, who make themselves, the enemies, the opponents of Jesus. How are they described? Verse 54, they're furious, they're gnashing their teeth.

We see them engage, in mob violence, having falsely accused, they now drag him, out of town, so that they can stone him. We see Saul, approving of their killing.

There is this understanding, that the church of Jesus, must be silenced, by hate. that's on display. [27 : 57] The early decades, early centuries, of the church, intensify that, still further. But we also see Stephen, and we've been told, that he is a man, who's filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ.

When we look at Stephen, we see a picture, of here as a follower of Jesus, living by faith, and dying by faith. What does he see, in his last moments?

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.

He sees the reality, of the risen Lord, returned to the throne of heaven. His Savior, the one he will soon be with. And so Stephen, worships, worships, in the face of the world's fury, because he sees, and knows, that Jesus is Lord, and that Jesus alone, deserves glory.

That's striking. What he says, may be even more striking. Verse 59, while they were stoning him, context is so important, for words.

[29 : 16] As he is being put to death, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell on his knees, and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. He lives, and he dies, trusting, in the risen Lord Jesus, in the reality, and the hope, of life beyond death, of life with Jesus.

He is calm, because he knows, Jesus has won the victory, Jesus has gone before him, and where Jesus now is, Stephen will shortly be. And then he prays, forgive their sin.

In his dying breath, he expresses love, for his enemies. He seeks, their salvation. And what would drive him, to do that, as he is being stoned to death, surely, it's because he knows, the Lord Jesus dying words, Father, forgive them.

They don't know, what they are doing. And with that, phase one, of Jesus' mission, draws to a close.

[30 : 34] And Stephen's life, shows us, the church, that changes the world, is a church, where members, are seeing, Jesus' glory.

And where church members, follow, Jesus' pattern, of forgiveness, and loving sacrifice. Jesus wants, the clue, and every local church, to be places, where you and I, can belong to.

As Luke showed us, these two very different ways, of looking at Jesus, these two very different world views, as we close, just ask yourself the question, which set of values, and beliefs, comes across, as more, attractive, which response, to Jesus, moves us closer, to the kind of world, we all want.

Tim Keller's wife, Kathy Keller, once said, Christians, are often criticized, for being fundamentalists. If you've ever been accused, of that, being a fundamentalist.

she said, it very much depends, though, doesn't it, what your fundamentals are. When the church, follows the fundamentals, of Jesus, that's a profoundly, positive, and beautiful thing.

[32 : 06] Because it creates, a community, of love, and grace. Why? Because when we follow Jesus, enemies are being forgiven. Kindness is being extended, beyond differences.

Truth, and love, are being held together. God's grace, is being seen, and heard. Isn't this the kind, of community, that you and I, want to be a part of?

Doesn't this get us, closer to the world, that Jesus, came to create, one day? That's the mission, of the church of Jesus, to be this kind, of community, that would bring people, in, to both hear, and to experience, the good news, of the love of God, through Jesus.