

Jesus is unstoppable

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Date: 11 February 2024

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[0 : 00] and Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyreneans and of the Alexandrians and those of Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.

And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the next passage.

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

[1 : 25] Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.

You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling at his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

[2 : 34] And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house.

He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those that were scattered went about preaching the word. Good morning, everyone.

Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Lord, we're all coming in today with different things on our minds and heart.

But the one thing we all share in common is that we need to see Jesus afresh, to warm our hearts again to your power and your grace.

[3 : 39] So please would you do that. Speak through your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, reading newsletters from missionaries, I don't know how you feel when they arrive in your inbox.

But one of the privileges is you get to share their discouragement. You feel their discouragement and it moves us to pray.

And I just want to share a few, just a few of recent ones I've heard. One, he feels at the mercy of others. He was put on a plane to get to a hospital for surgery over a sickness he can't control and then flown to the wrong place.

And then he's put on a bus and the bus driver kicked him off because someone had ruined his paperwork. Another had dozens come to the Christmas lunch and they invited them a few days later to a little church gathering in their home.

And many said that they would come and you know where this is going. They get up early. They prepare the house. They buy some food for the people coming to share. And no one turns up.

[5 : 04] Another spending multiple years raising support from churches and training mission agencies and then getting a visa in a very closed location, uprooting their two children, over a year of language learning on location, and then the government authorities arrest colleagues of theirs and they don't know what to do now.

All their plans shattered. I heard of, this isn't a newsletter, but I heard of a man and his wife and their child who were killed in the 2004 tsunami.

They were training for Christian ministry, working among uni students. Why did God wipe out some of his servants who were ready to go?

Do you feel the discouragement? It's one of the privileges of reading the newsletters. It should move us to pray. And I think it makes us ask, what are you doing, Jesus?

What are you doing? So often, don't you feel disillusioned and discouraged at the church's call to display and speak the good news of Jesus?

[6 : 33] Here in the story of Acts, we do not get all the answers to our questions. Of course we don't, but I'm not going to claim we do. But the Holy Spirit through Luke, he shows us what Jesus was doing in the early church.

I don't know how you read Acts and not be encouraged. You read the rest of the epistles and you see there's a lot of mess in the church.

But you read Acts, I dare you not to be encouraged because we're shown what Jesus was doing. And the comfort we can take is Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

So in Acts, we pick up the story. The church in Jerusalem is going from strength to strength.

That internal threat we looked at in chapter 6 of the Greek-speaking widows being overlooked in the church's care. That threat to undermine the display of the household of God is sold.

[7 : 39] They appoint what we're going to call deacons and they care. All the prejudice is gone in the household of God. They care for all widows alike.

But they keep prioritising the word of God going out. Satan attempts to undo the church from within and he can't. Jesus uses that threat to advance the witness of the gospel.

Not to undermine it, but he uses it to advance it. So compelling was the church now in Jerusalem that Luke wants us to see even many priests believe.

Jerusalem, we picture Jerusalem and yes, it revolved around the temple. Even the early church were meeting in the temple. The apostles are teaching in the temple. So the temple was filled with this new movement.

But there were many synagogues. Some were Hebrew-speaking, some Greek-speaking, because Jews from surrounding nations who only spoke Greek had resettled in Jerusalem and they had synagogues.

[8 : 42] And in these synagogues, they had priests who were teaching the law of Moses. What motivates priests to give up their job?

The first few weeks of Bible college, I was just exhausted meeting so many people and everyone was just asking each other their story. It's like, how did you come to faith?

How did you end up at Bible college? And it's just exhausting, to be honest. It's a privilege, like it's encouraging. But so many different stories. No two stories are the same.

But there's a similar theme. People had given up promising careers. People had given up certain plans of study. Some of them very high-paying.

Some of them just very secure jobs. And Jesus had rudely interrupted their life. He turned our lives upside down.

[9 : 42] That's the story of every Christian, isn't it? Jesus has rudely interrupted your plans and he's turned your life upside down. You are not living and caring about what you would be if Jesus hadn't ruined your self-destructive plans.

That's every Christian's story. What convinces priests out of a job? Think about it.

They were, by coming to faith, they were laying down their high status as mediators between God and man. They were going, oh, I shouldn't be called a priest anymore, really.

Like, maybe they haven't worked all this out yet, but the outcome is I shouldn't be a priest. I shouldn't be a mediator. Because there's only one mediator, the Lord Jesus. They weren't claiming to be the authorities on God's word anymore. They weren't the ones teaching. They were submitting to the apostles. They're the ones who interpret scripture correctly. Not me.

[10:49] Their identity, their calling has been obliterated and they've been turned upside down.

Many priests came to faith. So compelling was the witness. What convinced them? Well, I think the opening chapters of Acts would lead us to the answer that it was obvious that the Holy Spirit was just poured out in abundance.

Something was going on in Jerusalem. Something massive had changed. What the prophets called the last days are here.

That's what Peter's speech at Pentecost, chapter 2, is about. He focuses the outpouring of the Spirit, not only on the kings and prophets, like in the Old Testament, and a few special individuals, but on all God's people.

Just a deluge of the Spirit. Why? Because the king is enthroned. That's Peter's speech. We're in the last days.

[12:00] Marked by the Spirit because the king is enthroned. And so this teaching had filled Jerusalem, this teaching about Jesus of Nazareth.

The apostles were teaching in the temple courtyard and we see in our passage today that the teaching is also filling the Greek synagogues. The church and the apostles appoint Stephen and he has the authority to speak this message as well.

And it's filling all of Jerusalem. I think that's why we get the detail of this synagogue from lots of different countries coming in. It's not just a bit of Jerusalem.

It's filled now with this teaching. And this teaching was amassing a huge following. Like thousands upon thousands of people were coming to this movement.

Luke tells us that the ruling class, in chapter 5, verse 17, they're jealous. Now that's a divine insight into what's going on. They saw this mass following of the apostles and the religious authorities were jealous.

[13:21] Something was going on. This movement, something was going on and the priests were seeing it. More than that, there were signs and wonders going on through the apostles and through Stephen.

It was undeniable. You go back and read the stories. They heal the cripple and the authorities, they can't question the signs and wonders.

They just want to silence the apostles. But the priests who came to faith are going, what is going on? Signs and wonders are happening left, right and centre. People were bringing their sick into the street just for Peter's shadow to fall over them.

Everyone held the apostles in high esteem because of their teaching and the signs and wonders.

And as we saw in chapter 6, the division in Jerusalem in the synagogues, between Greek speaking and Hebrew speaking, there's unity in the church.

They're caring for one another as family. I think even that is part of the witness. The spirit is moving. I think that's why the priests came to faith.

[14:33] Because it's just so obvious that the spirit is just being poured out. And if the spirit is being poured out, the king must be enthroned.

Jesus is that king. So some, like the priests, they believe. They're cut to the heart. They come to Jesus for forgiveness of sins.

And they submit to the apostles, believing Jesus is Lord. But Jesus always divides.

The high priests and the authorities who counted themselves more pure, Hebrews, they're in charge of the temple. They're in charge of all God's people, Israel.

They're not willing for Jesus to turn their lives upside down. And the pressure has been building.

They've been opposing this movement from the outset. All of Jerusalem is now divided.

[15:39] Even the Greek-speaking synagogues are divided. Some are believing. But it's here in this Greek-speaking synagogue that it reaches boiling point.

I think maybe that's because Jerusalem is just full of the witness of the church now. And people are fully divided.

Jesus said he didn't come to bring peace. He came to bring a sword. And he's divided Jerusalem. And he's still dividing even our families today. He divides.

The authorities first strictly warn Peter and John, stop talking about this Jesus.

Then they arrest all the apostles. But the angel sets them free. And then they willingly come to the council again and stop talking about Jesus.

[16:36] And this time they give them a good beating. And now we come to the very first Christian martyr.

It's reached boiling point. Now we're going to spend two weeks looking at Stephen's speech. I'm just going to tell you what the major themes are now. But I would encourage you to go and read it. We'll get the most out of this if we are familiar with the passage. So I want to stay bird's eye view today.

And then we're going to go a bit deeper in the next two weeks. There's two accusations against Stephen and his gospel. You're blaspheming God.

Talking about Jesus. You're blaspheming God. You're blaspheming Moses. You're blaspheming God because you're saying that the temple will be destroyed.

[17:39] You're blaspheming Moses because you're saying that the customs of Moses are going to change. There's the two accusations. That's what his speech is about.

Temple. Moses. I would encourage you as you're reading it this week, if you read it this week, consider is the charges true or not?

Because Luke says they're false witnesses. In what sense are they false? I'm just going to leave you with that question. So that's where we're heading in the next two weeks.

But I want you to consider Stephen being arrested, brought before this high priestly council.

This is the same council Jesus was condemned under. Do you get nervous at a job interview? I don't know if you've had one recently.

[18:43] It's terrifying, the thought of being rejected. Could you imagine being dragged into court knowing they're looking for ways to find you guilty?

It would be terrifying. When Martin Luther was finally brought before the Catholic authorities to recant all his views that we so, our church is built on.

Well, it's not his views. It's scripture. It's scripture. But when he was brought before that council to recant or be killed as a heretic, he's famous for boldly saying, My conscience is captive to the word of God.

Here I stand. I can do no other. But he first, that was the next day.

The first time he appeared before the council, apparently he was mumbling, trembling, asking for time to consider. And then he went that night and was praying in deep prayer and came back the next day bold.

[20:04] I tell that because we might lift Martin Luther up. He was as fearful as any of us. It was the spirit that made him bold.

And I think that's the same here for Stephen. We're not meant to go, wow, Stephen is a courageous character. We're meant to see the spirit field him. We're told that again and again.

He was full of the spirit. Amen. All who believe in Jesus have the gift of the spirit. But we get a glimpse in Acts, I think, that we get a fresh feeling when we're called to certain tasks.

All of us share the spirit. But the spirit is the one who makes Stephen courageous. I think Luke wants us to see Jesus in Stephen.

He shares so much in common with Jesus' death. The secret false witnesses. Answering before the high priest.

[21:17] I think Stephen, in choosing to give this speech, is really choosing to lay down his life. The climax of his speech is what Jesus says before the high priest.

It's talking about seeing the son of man. Stephen's the only one to use that phrase, son of man. He's condemned like Jesus outside the city.

Like the covenant curse. You are outside Israel. As a blasphemer. He prays like Jesus, entrusting his spirit. And praying for his enemies.

We're meant to be seeing Jesus here. It's Jesus by his spirit feeling, Stephen. And what tips the council over the edge into a murderous frenzy?

Well, it's with a fresh feeling of the spirit, but he, full of the Holy Spirit, verse 55, he gets this vision of, he gets to see straight into heaven.

[22 : 24] And instead of keeping that vision to himself, he says to those who are already ready to kill him, he boldly says, look, behold.

He shares it with them. And he gives the clearest, understandable gospel presentation. I see the heavens open.

And the son of man standing at the right hand of God. He's saying the glory that you once found in the temple, that's in Jesus.

I don't have just access to a physical temple in Jesus. I can see straight into heaven. Stephen's defence to the charges that the temple and the customs of Moses are changing.

In a sense, he's saying, yeah, yes. Because we're in the last days. He gives just a very clear testimony.

[23 : 33] And it's that testimony that sends them into a frenzy. They'd rather silence and kill this man rather than have their lives turned upside down.

So what does a spirit-filled witness to Jesus look like? It's bold. It's bold. And it's clear. And it's character that chooses to lay your life down for your opponents.

And it's to point to Jesus. Look. That's what sends them. That's what they hate. Jesus. Jesus. Now, the ministry family I talked about who were killed in that tsunami back in 2004, his dad was a member of parliament in Denmark.

And because he was known, the press wanted to interview him. And so on TV, with the pressure of a TV interview, the hard question was put to him.

You say you're a Christian. How can you believe in a God who took your son like that? Oh, what pressure.

[25 : 00] The father said, I can't answer all those questions. But my final measure that God is good is that he gave his own son to die on the cross.

Not only in my stead, but in the stead of my son. And I will see my son and my daughter-in-law again. It's bold.

It's clear. Clearly pointing to Jesus. That's what spirit-filled witness looks like. The spirit helps us do that.

If we feel afraid in our own ability, I think that's the point. We're not meant to rely on that. The spirit fills us. Consider how dark this day was.

The Jerusalem church was going from strength to strength. And then just imagine if one of us here in this room was killed like Stephen.

[26 : 11] Or a modern version of it. Wouldn't that shake us to the core? Great lamentation was made for Stephen.

Did he have a family? We're not told. But great lamentation. His years of ministry snuffed out. And then Saul targets not.

That wasn't enough. Saul leads the charge in men and women just searching for all he can find and putting them in prison. And so the believers are running for their lives.

Very little hope of returning. That they're leaving their homes. They're leaving Jerusalem. Like that was meant to be the place you met God. They're leaving all the security of what they've known.

The believers, like, think of the church. So beautiful in chapter 6. It's structured under the apostles. They're now cut off from the apostles. All that structure, gone.

[27 : 14] They're just scattered. Instead of the rich fellowship of being gathered, it looks like God's judgment.

Scattering in scripture, that is a word that pictures God's judgment. It looks like and it feels like God's judgment. They're dark days. They're dark days.

But most dark of all are those with the moral outrage. Who rejected the only name under heaven given to man by which we can be saved.

As they judged the messenger who clearly pointed to Jesus, Jesus is standing in judgment over them.

Their darkness, that's the biggest darkness of that day. They're cutting themselves off from life.

[28 : 14] There might be some listening today who sense that the Lord has been pursuing you.

You've been resisting him. You just can't shake all these Christian thoughts. You really want to and just get on with your life, but you can't shake them. He keeps putting annoying Christians in your life.

For some reason you're here today and you're not quite sure why. You don't want your life turned upside down by taking this Jesus seriously.

You know everything will change. It will, yes. But hear the warning in this passage.

It is a dreadful thought that the Lord might stop pursuing you and leave your life as it is. We don't hear of this council again.

[29 : 30] The story moves on. It was a dark day.

The darkest of all for those who rejected Jesus. The messenger of Jesus and therefore Jesus and therefore God. It would have been strange if the apostles and the scattered believers weren't filled with discouragement that day.

They must have been so disillusioned. What are you doing, Jesus? Was the one Stephen saw standing at the right hand of God, was he somehow overpowered by just the sheer social momentum against this movement?

Was he too far away, up in heaven, to help his poor Stephen? Did he want to do something? He just couldn't? Of course not. Could he not have sent his angels and blinded them all like he did for Elisha?

Like he did to Saul? Could he not have raised up Gamaliel to step in again and just calm them down?

[30 : 53] What's he doing? He's told us what he's doing. In chapter 1 verse 8. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

Jesus used the rage of his opponents to send his people into Judea and Samaria. And instead of the believers remaining quiet, you could understand if they just went, we're going to be a bit more careful here.

Let's be a bit quieter, shall we? Like, we almost died. No. Instead of relying on just the apostles' preaching, we're told in chapter 8 verse 4, now those who are scattered went about preaching the word.

In chapter 8, we're going to find in a couple weeks' time, there's just this mass conversion from Samaria. People that were cut off from the temple.

They're now in the living temple. They condemn Jesus. He comes back three days later. They kill Stephen.

[32 : 14] And we get introduced to Saul, who we're going to find is going to just take the gospel to Rome. They kick them out of Jerusalem.

Samaria is gathered in to the fold of God. This Jesus is unstoppable. He's busy gathering in his church. And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

He is still gathering in his people. And the self-assured religious people and those who had social power, those with the moral outrage, they just drop out of the story.

They're left in utter irrelevance. Jesus just keeps going. Do you believe the gospel will one day get into some of the closed-off places in the world, the North Koreas, the Stan countries?

Do you believe in Buddhist countries where you've got halls filled with people with blindfolds on, trying to escape the body to reach nirvana?

[33 : 30] Do you think Jesus is going to penetrate darkness like that? Of course he is. Of course he will, won't he? Because nothing can stop this Jesus.

You let Christians talk, people come to Christ. You kill them, it's spread and people keep. The church grows even more.

You can't stop him. Didn't he break through your darkened understanding if you're a believer here today? Nothing stops this Jesus. I want to finish by asking, do you struggle with how Jesus got the victory through Stephen?

I've been wrestling with this. Doesn't he care for his servants like Stephen? Like so many army generals, are his servants just, are we just cannon fodder?

Just go, go die so that my mission can be advanced. Is that what he's like? Does he care about Stephen? Well, Jesus is so united to his people by his spirit, he can say to Saul, after Saul had approved of Stephen's execution, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[35 : 02] Me. Me. That's how united Jesus feels with his suffering people. You're persecuting me.

And we also know that Jesus cares for Stephen because despite all the similarities to the way these two men died, there is a big difference. And I love the detail in here. Jesus fully and actually died for Stephen.

So that when Stephen died for Jesus, it was as harmless as he fell asleep. Jesus actually died for Stephen.

So that when Stephen died for Jesus, it was as harmless as he fell asleep. Amen. That's how much he cares for his people.

And does he care for his people? Well, what greater honour could you give Stephen in describing his life and his death with words that remind us of the Lord Jesus himself?

[36 : 15] Here we are talking about him today. To share in the likeness of Christ in dying for your enemies. Here is Stephen.

Over the shouts of rage against him, he's shouting over the top of them saying, forgive them. Wow. Stephen has the honour of sharing in Jesus' suffering so that the gospel spreads.

Now, I know, as far as I can see, none of us are going to be called to martyrdom. It's unlikely at the moment, isn't it? Let's be realistic. But we may be training people and sending people into places where that is a very possible thing to happen.

AFES might be training up students who do go places like that. Are we going to be doing that? And aren't we all called to the honour of sharing Christ's suffering by clearly pointing to him?

We're all called to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. It's going to be costly.

Whatever situation, we take that seriously, relying on the Spirit.

[37 : 39] He shares that honour. The thing we worship Jesus for, he shares it with Stephen. He shares that honour with all his people. So yes, he very much cares for his people.

So what are you doing, Jesus? He's told us. We're still in the last days. He is still enthroned. He is still pouring out his Spirit.

And he's sharing with us the honour of laying down our lives to bring in all the people of the family of God. Will you pray?

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you are advancing into the world, into your world.

Thank you that you've broken through our hearts to bring us to repentance and faith. And maybe trust that you are still doing that today.

[38 : 49] Lord, I pray that you would help us to see laying down our life in following you, to point people to the life in you.

I pray that you would help us to see that as an honour rather than as interrupting life. Help us to see it as sharing in your life.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.