

From Stones to Grace: Responding to Hurt with Christ's Love

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[0 : 00] We're going verse by verse through the book of Acts, and as we do so, the whole point of going verse by verse through God's Word is that we are able to hear from God what the writer intended for us to understand, and the whole point of preaching is not a history lesson.

The whole point of preaching the Word of God, as I had a homiletics professor one time, he said, every time you preach, I want you to imagine me sitting in the back row, and when everyone is gone, I'm going to be sitting back there with a stern face, and I'm going to ask you, so what? To help us to realize and to remember that God's Word is meant to make a difference in our life. And so this morning, as we look to the model, to the example of Stephen and the way he responded to hurt, the way he responded to being attacked wrongfully, I believe we're going to be able to see, modeled before us, a very Christ-like response.

Not only from what Stephen modeled for us, but also from the very words of Jesus, as we look into this, and Stephen, and even Jesus Christ, who amidst the stings of life, looked up and showed us the most profound Christ-like response.

So today, as we look into the life of Stephen, we're going to learn how to respond when we're hit by life's hardest stones that rock our world.

[1 : 59] In life's painful moments, it will reveal the depth of our faith, and it's also going to show us the essence of our character.

Because when we're hurt, when we're stung, and when we're surprised by something, what really, we respond in the way that comes from internally, comes from what's inside of us.

So based on Stephen's response to his attackers this morning, as well as Jesus' command, we must forgive those who hurt us.

Let's take a look.

Then they cast him out of the city.

[3 : 40] They cast him out of the city. They cast him out of the city. They cast him out of the city. And they began to stone him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And they stoned Stephen. They kept on stoning Stephen, as he was calling on God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not charge them with this sin.

And when he said this, he fell asleep. So the question is, how should we respond when someone hurts us? Sometimes it's going to be family.

Sometimes it's going to be a total stranger. Sometimes it might be someone at work who stabs you in the back because they wanted that promotion. Maybe they lied about you or maybe they took the credit for something that was your idea, something that you put all the work in and they took the credit for it.

[4 : 49] How will you respond? Well, the first thing that we see modeled by the life of Stephen, we should look to God when someone hurts us. Our first instinct, unlike that wasp or that bee sting, to swat it away and to retaliate, should be to look to God when we are hurt.

Look at verse 54. When they heard these things, let's look at the setting. When they heard these things, when they heard what Stephen had said in his history lesson of the nation of Israel, when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

The Jewish leaders were infuriated at what they heard Stephen say at his accusation. Well, of what did Stephen accuse them?

That they were the blasphemers, that they were hard-necked, that they were hard-hearted, and they were hard-headed.

That's what he is accusing them of. But notice what Stephen's words did. And all Stephen did was give a history lesson. All Stephen did was go to their Old Testament scriptures and show them how everything they accused Stephen, everything of which they accused Stephen, the religious leaders were guilty themselves of all of those things.

[6 : 26] But they became so infuriated. Stephen's words, he says, it cut them to the heart. That's an interesting word in the Greek.

The meaning of it is to become violently, emotionally affected, or to become infuriated. But the word picture behind it, the picture of that word is likened to be emotionally cut in half by a saw.

Interestingly, the same word that Luke used for the Jewish leaders being cut to the heart is the same word that the writer of Hebrews used in Hebrews 11.37.

If you look up Hebrews 11.37, it talks about martyrs, those who were put to death for their faith. It's said that they were put to death in all kinds of ways, and some were cut in half.

And it's not that magician's trick. They used real saws. And they cut people in half. Can you imagine dying like that? It's the same word that Luke used in Acts 7.54.

[7 : 51] It's almost like when Stephen said these things, they were cut in half. And emotionally, he cut them to the bone.

That's how infuriated they were. And then it says they began to gnash at him with their teeth. We've seen that in other places as well.

The religious leaders were speechless. They had no response. So what did they do? They ground their teeth together. They were so angry. They were like a pack of hungry, snarling wolves.

They were just so angry. With Stephen, they gnashed at him with their teeth. So how did Stephen respond?

It says, But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. The first thing that jumps out in this account of Stephen is that he gazes towards heaven.

[8 : 56] He looks to God when he is being retaliated upon or when he is being attacked. So how should we respond when someone stabs us in the back?

How should we respond when someone treats us wrong? How should we respond even when we think someone treats us wrongly? Or when a friend maybe betrays us? It could even be a family member.

Well, it begins with recognizing God's sovereignty. God is in control. Do you realize that nothing happens by accident? Everything that happens in our life as a follower of Jesus, God allows to happen.

And he can use it in our lives. Trusting that God is in control even in our pain. Stephen looks up to heaven and he sees God and realizes that God is on his throne.

Theologian A.W. Pink wrote this. He says, It says, God knew exactly what he was doing when he allowed Stephen's attackers to stone him.

[10 : 34] God knew exactly what he was doing when he allowed Stephen to be killed for his testimony and for his faith. It would become the turning point in the gospel spreading to the Samaritans, to Samaria, and then ultimately to the Gentile nations.

Stephen's stoning in Acts chapter 7 is the turning point where God turns from the gospel being presented to the Jews and it moves outwardly from Jerusalem and it goes to the rest of the world. And the rest of the part of Acts is the gospel going out into Samaria. And as Jesus promised, they would be his witnesses to the uttermost part of the world.

So we can also draw strength from his presence. He being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen saw God's glory and he saw Jesus standing in heaven ready to receive him. Now, Scripture tells us that when Jesus, after his resurrection, ascended to heaven, he went and he sat down at the right hand of God.

[11 : 55] We see that prophesied in Psalm 110, verse number 1, but we also see it in Mark chapter 16 and verse 19. Jesus ascended up to heaven and he sits at the right hand of God.

That is the place of authority. That is that special place beside a king, beside someone who is on the throne. But we ask ourselves the question, why is Jesus standing?

Why is Jesus not sitting when Stephen looks up to heaven? Now, there's a lot of conjecture if you read the different commentaries. Some have different, they posit different, different potential reasons for why Jesus is standing.

But is it possible that Jesus stood to welcome Stephen or maybe to applaud Stephen for his brave faith and to cheer Stephen for what he's doing?

So he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And that's the right hand of God. It's in our weakest moments. But turning our eyes to God can bring unparalleled comfort.

[13:07] Because if we think about it, ultimately, God is the only one that we need. God is the only one.

And whatever he chooses to provide us is all that we need. Because people are going to let us down. I let people down probably on a fairly regular basis.

And we do that to one another. Sometimes inadvertently. God forbid that it's on purpose. But we find unparalleled comfort when we look to God in heaven.

And thirdly, we can stay grounded in our faith. Because notice verse 56. And Stephen said, look. He's telling this to the very men that are going to be murdering him.

He says, look, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man. That's an important thing that Stephen says. I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

[14:08] Stephen says he sees the Son of Man. Even when faced with opposition. Even when facing his attackers. Stephen leaned in and he's proclaiming.

He's still proclaiming the deity of Jesus Christ. Because only a few years ago. Only a few years before. Jesus stood before this very same tribunal.

And he had been condemned for answering affirmatively. The high priest's question. As to whether or not he was Israel's Messiah.

And Jesus said he was. And Mark 14, 62. And you will see the Son of Man. Sitting at the right hand of the mighty one.

And coming on the clouds of heaven. Now what Stephen was saying in effect was. I see the Messiah. And it's Jesus.

[15:07] And what Stephen is saying. He's saying his vision confirmed. That Jesus is the very Son of God.

And condemned the council for having rejected him. You see we should look to God. When someone hurts us. It will keep us grounded in our faith.

And God will give us the strength. To persevere. When we look to him. Next. What do we see from the life of Stephen? That we should go to prayer.

When someone hurts us. Not only should we look to God. But we should pray to God. When we are hurt. Excuse me. In life.

By anyone. Look at verse number 57. Again. Let's go back. To the scene. What we. We heard.

[16:05] Before. Was. They were infuriated. He cut them. To the heart. He was sawing them in half. Emotionally. They were infuriated.

And they. Were gnashing their teeth. They were so. Angry. At him. And they rushed him. Together. As a group. And they take him out of the city.

And they began stoning him. And they cried. Out. With a loud voice. And they stopped their ears.

So they wouldn't hear anything anymore. That's how. In. That's how furious. They were. At him. And they ran at him. With. One accord.

The response of the Sanhedrin. Was immediate. And it was. Violent. Because they quickly saw.

The theological implications. They knew what Stephen was saying. Implicated them.

[17:00] In the murder of Jesus. Their. Real. Messiah. And they couldn't take it. They did not. They didn't like. What he said.

Because it made them. The guilty party. In this. And it made them. The ones. That were. Guilty. Of what they were saying. Stephen. Was doing.

So they saw. The theological implication. That Israel was guilty. Excuse me. The law was temporary. And the temple. Would be. Done away. They don't need the temple anymore. Because God. Was residing.

Within the hearts. Of. Mankind. Those who trusted. Thouren. Like him out of the city. And. They began to. Stone him. They cast him out. And.

They stone him. The tense of the verb here. They began to stone him. Excuse me. And the witnesses laid down their clothes. At the feet. Of a young man. Named.

[17 : 55] Saul. In verse 58. We see our first. Introduction. To the man. Who became. One of the greatest followers. Of Jesus. Here. he's named Saul, he later is named Paul, the Apostle Paul. Very likely one of the members of the temple where Stephen comes in and starts talking about Jesus, Paul, Tarsus, one of these Hellenist or Greek-speaking provinces from where Saul was in Tarsus. And so Saul was consenting to the death. It's very possible that Saul got involved in the stoning of Stephen as well. Saul wasn't an innocent bystander by any means. So we see Saul who would later become Paul. And in verse 59 we see the same word again. The tense repeated, they kept on stoning Stephen as he was calling on

God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. So now with the strength of God's presence, with the strength of Stephen's faith, did something that many of us might find challenging in this particular instance. He went to prayer. He looks up, he sees God, he sees the Lord Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God and he prays directly to Jesus. He finds solace in conversation with God, with the Lord Jesus Christ. And isn't this prayer reminiscent of the prayer of Jesus on the cross? He says, Father, in your hands I commend my spirit. And so it's almost as if he is repeating the very words of Jesus' prayer on the cross. And prayer is more than just simply words.

Stephen was ready to go to heaven. He was ready to die for his faith. Stephen's prayer also reminds us of the importance of understanding God's perspective in the midst of pain. Jesus feels your pain and he feels mine. God sees our pain. This is something if we remember. If we'll remember this next time you're hurting. God sees your pain from the perspective of eternity. For us it may seem like it last days, weeks, months, years. But when God sees our pain and when we compare, what did Paul say about the afflictions that he was experiencing? He says it does not compare with the weight of glory. And when we look at eternity and when we look at our pain in respect to eternity, it's just a short period of time. And so when we see our pain from the perspective of God, we understand that we can surrender the outcome to God. Because God is ultimately in control.

In situations where we're hurt, we're hurt by someone we trust, hurt by someone that we love, and where all control seems to be lost, Stephen's prayer teaches us the essence of surrender. Primarily, it's laying the outcome at the feet of God. Stephen knew he was going to die.

[21 : 30] I mean, there was no two ways about it. He knew the outcome. He knew he was not getting out of this. He surrendered the outcome to God and he says, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. He was ready to go. But that's not all that he did. From what he did next, we learned that we should forgive and pray for those who hurt us. Now that's difficult for us in the flesh. That does not come easily when someone hurts you, when someone says something bad about you, when someone is negative toward you, when, excuse me, when you feel rejected by someone, the natural thing to do is not to look to God, pray to him, and forgive and pray good things for that person that hurt you. Our response is like that bee sting or that wasp sting. We tend to retaliate. We want to swat that person away or we don't want to swat the pain away. So we should forgive.

And we see that in verse number 60. Then Stephen knelt down and cried out with a loud voice. And again, we see something reminiscent of Jesus's words on the cross. He says, Lord, do not charge them with this sin. Jesus said, don't hold this sin against them. So Peter's saying, don't take this and don't hold it against them. Don't put it against their charge. And when he said this, he fell asleep. Stephen followed Jesus's ultimate example. When Stephen chose to forgive, he was mirroring what Jesus himself did when he was attacked wrongly. And when he was put to death for being who he was. But why? Why would Stephen, why would even Jesus choose to forgive those who was causing them so much pain? Well, because they understood the power of forgiveness.

They understood the power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not just for the one being forgiven. You know, sometimes people think, well, if I forgive them, I'm letting them off the hook.

If I forgive someone, I'm saying somehow on some level that what they did wasn't so bad. That's not it at all. Because in the power that we, that is in forgiveness is, it's not just for the one being forgiven. It's a release for the one doing the forgiving. We release ourselves, it releases us from the bondage of being bitter and the oh, woe is me and oh, how bad they are and oh, how terrible it is.

We are releasing ourselves from being in bondage to that and saying, you know what?

It doesn't matter. All I need is God and what he chooses to provide. And it releases the forgiver for us to be able to move forward in joy, to move forward in fullness, completeness, and be still

accomplishing what God wants us to do, sharing his faith, sharing the gospel with others around us, exhorting and be, excuse me, being who he wants us to be.

[25 : 10] So they both understood the power of forgiveness. It's a powerful tool that allows us to, it frees us to move forward without constraint. And then not only that, Jesus commands us to forgive.

In Matthew 18, 21 and 22, then Peter came to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother or sister sin against me and I forgive them? I think Peter was trying to figure out, well, Lord, is there a limit?

There's come a point where I say, you know what? Enough is enough. And forgive them up to seven times. You know, go on, give me a number. We like that. We like, you know, we like things being cut and dried. You know, that's why, this is why it's so difficult for, for so many when Paul says, we have freedom in Christ. We're no longer under the law because we want to know, well, you know what? Well, how much is, is enough? How much is too much?

You know, when? No, he said, let the Holy Spirit lead you. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Don't let someone else guide you. Let the Holy Spirit guide you as to being what is, what is right, what is wrong.

Excuse me. And so he says, how many times? When, when is enough, enough, Lord? And Jesus said to him, I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to 70 times, seven. And we can take what Jesus said, not as being a specific number, but what, in effect, what Jesus was saying was, not just seven, but multiply that. And in effect, there is no limit to how much you forgive. Because I want you to, I want us to think about this one thing. I want us to make it personal.

[27 : 08] How often do you and I sin against God daily? How would we feel if God said, you know what?

Enough's enough. This is the last time you come to me and confess because I'm not forgiving anymore. Well, God, that's not fair. Well, it wasn't fair sending Jesus to the cross, was it? For my sin and for yours.

And so if we want God to continue to forgive us, should we not continue to forgive others just as we have been forgiven? So how will we respond when someone hurts us? Respond with blessing instead of cursing back to verse 60 in Acts chapter seven. And he knelt down, cried out with a loud voice.

And he says, Lord, don't charge them. This don't charge this against them. Don't charge them with this sin. How's that possible? Remember, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Stephen was allowing the Holy Spirit to control him, surrender to God and let his Holy Spirit give you the strength, give you the power not to retaliate, but to forgive and to pray for them.

[28 : 34] As we come to the end of verse number 60, I want us to pay attention to what's brought out by Luke. It says, and when he had said this, he fell asleep. The old Greek word and the metaphor of sleep for death is common in all languages, but it's very appropriate here, just like Jesus used in the case of Lazarus. Matter of fact, we get our English word cemetery from a form of this Greek word, because is not a cemetery a place where the dead sleep? So we get our English word cemetery from the word that Luke used for Stephen fell asleep, which was a metaphor, a euphemism for being killed for dying.

One commentator calls this word choice a picture word of rest and calmness, which stands in dramatic contrast to the rage and violence of the scene. All around Stephen, there was rage and violence.

They were attacking him like a pack of hungry, snarling wolves. And here is Stephen, calmly looking towards heaven, leaving his situation in the hands of God.

And so he was a picture of calm in contrast to the rage and violence going on around him. And so I believe Luke used that term, he fell asleep, which is a picture of, because one day if Jesus tarries, if he, Jesus waits and you and I breathe our final breath on earth, if you know Jesus Christ as your savior, you're going to breathe your final breath on earth.

And you're going to take your very next in heaven with Jesus. As the apostle Paul said, for us to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

[30 : 58] And that relationship, what allows that is simply by placing our faith and our trust in Jesus Christ alone. Like I said last week, it's not religion.

It's not what we do that gets us right with God. It's what Jesus has done that makes us right with God.

So this morning, if you are here, if you are watching this and you are just not sure that you have the right relationship with God, it's very, very simple.

The Bible says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All have sinned. There is none righteous. No, not one. So it's very simple.

Number one, realize that we're a sinner. Number two, realize that God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And when Jesus Christ rose on that third day, he showed that God was satisfied with the penalty that Jesus paid on our behalf for our sin.

[32 : 10] And he eventually ascended to heaven and seated at the right hand of God. And one of the last words that Jesus said, it's finished. My payment for your sins finished for the sin of the world is complete.

So this morning, if you want to know how to be right with God, it's simply admit to God that you're a sinner. Trust what Jesus Christ did on the cross of Calvary as being the full payment for your sin. Follow him. That's it. For by grace are we saved through faith. And that not of yourselves, that it's a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

By grace, through faith alone. Grace, by grace, through faith alone. And so Stephen breathed his final breath on earth.

And I believe, based upon the Apostle Paul's words, later, he was received up by Jesus Christ. We've all been hurt by someone, or we all will be hurt by someone.

[33 : 20] See, that's just simply the reality of life. It's an inevitable part of our human experience. Yet Stephen's story, echoing that of Jesus himself, he offers us a profound roadmap.

How do we respond when people hurt us? How do we respond when we're stung by the pain of life? Stephen looked heavenward in the midst of his pain.

He found solace in prayer. And he chose forgiveness over revenge. Just as each of us, in the tapestry of life, we see those hanging threads, and we just don't know how they all fit together. But from above, God sees a beautiful tapestry. He sees how the pains, the joys, and the difficulties of our life, all work together to produce within us maturity, so that Jesus might one day present us as being mature and complete in Christ.

So, our hurts, our betrayals, our wounds are not without purpose. Through them, God can work wonders, not only in our lives, but in the lives of others, because people will look at us, people will look at you, and say, how can you respond that way?

[34 : 41] How in the world can you not retaliate? How can you not give up? How can you? To the glory of God. It's only because of Him. Holy Spirit, being like Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith.

God can work wonders, teaching us grace, resilience, and overwhelming power of forgiveness. So as we step out today, remember Stephen.

Remember the immense strength that it took place to face His attackers, and look to God. And in His final words, keep His faith, and in effect, say to them, you know, you remember when Jesus, He didn't say this, but almost as if to say, you remember when Jesus said, you're going to see the Son of Man, see to the right hand of God?

He uses that same term. I see the Son of Man, and He's with God, on the throne, in heaven, the man that you guys murdered.

Let Stephen inspire us to do the same. When we're hurt, when we're stung, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to keep our eyes fixed on God, lean into Him in prayer, and choose the path of love and forgiveness, instead of retaliation, no matter how difficult it may seem.

[36 : 04] In doing so, not only do you honor God, but you also become a beacon of His love, and a beacon of grace, in a world that desperately needs it.

Let's pray. Father, this morning, we live in a world that hurts. Father, we live in a world today, where we look all around us, and people are hurting.

Father, I pray this morning, that you would help us, to be loving. And Lord, as we have come together, as a body of Christ, to worship you together, Lord, I pray that we would work together, to love one another, to care for one another, to support one another.

I pray, Heavenly Father, that we, would be the safest place, for the body of Christ.

So that we could be, recharged. So that we could be filled up, with your fullness, to go out, and to minister all over again, to our, to our broken and hurting world around us, and to come back again.

[37 : 34] And I pray, Heavenly Father, that we would be, taking care of one another. We thank you, Father, for what you're going to do.

Help us to be able to, look to you, and come to you, when we're hurting. And receive from you, the strength, the love, and the comfort, that only you can provide.

We thank you, Father. Father, we pray this, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.