

Death and Glory

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 0 0] I'd like you to turn back to Acts chapter 6, the end of the chapter on page 117. And I want to thank Patty for reading that very long reading and sermon.

I don't know how many throat lozenges she went through, but very good job. And you're here to hear a second sermon as well after Stephen.

So I want to think about Stephen in this sermon. And as we think about him, one of the images that comes to mind is the number of photographs that have been taken of Saddam Hussein in prison.

And the interesting thing about, and the striking thing about the pictures of Saddam in prison, is that there has been a change in him, in the way that the world perceives him, and in the way that Iraqis perceive him as well.

In many ways, he seems to have diminished in his power, in his influence, in his ability to strike terror in people. In many ways, he has become somebody who does not have any power, does not have any influence.

[1 : 1 2] And those who meet with him, opposition party leaders and so forth, are struck by speaking to a man that at one time had the power of life and death over them, and suddenly has no power.

And they see him that way as well. Well, the opposite thing is happening with Stephen. He is arrested. He is in prison. He is standing before his accusers.

But he gains power. He gains stature. He takes on this greater influence and power than anything he had before. And the only reason for that is because he is speaking.

He is speaking as a witness of what Jesus Christ has done. And in this place where you are so vulnerable, where you have no rights at all, here is somebody who gains power and stature.

It's simply because of his witness. It's because of the sermon that he gives. The interesting thing about that sermon is it would have gotten a failing grade at just about every seminary in North America.

[2 : 1 8] No one enjoyed that sermon. There was no illustrations in it. And it met no felt needs. It was very confrontational.

It made people feel very angry. And it caused the church to be disliked in the community. It was a disastrous sermon by many of our standards.

And not only that, but the preacher, who was an incredibly well-liked minister, powerful leader, and well-liked by the community, was killed as a result.

So what is it about that sermon that Stephen preaches that is so powerful? What is it about that sermon that actually transforms the church so that immediately after it's preached, the good news of Jesus goes rushing out into the world like a great flood?

Well, it's a brilliant example of why the apostles were so devoted to the preaching of the word and to prayer. It is because the witness to God in speech has great power.

[3 : 23] And the thing particularly about this sermon that is so powerful is that it literally begins and ends with the glory of God and is filled throughout with the glory of God.

And in fact, you see in verse 1 of chapter 7, the God of glory appears to our father Abraham. And then at the end, there is this incredible vision at the end of his sermon of the glory of God as well.

And all through, the glory of God goes through as well. You see God speaking and sending and promising and revealing himself and punishing and raising up nations and bringing them down again and rescuing people.

And most of all, all of the things that Stephen points to from the Old Testament point to Jesus Christ. And that is what makes a sermon that is a powerful witness.

It is one that glorifies God throughout it. And it is one that points to Jesus. The way to actually determine whether a sermon is a good one or not is whether it does those two things.

[4 : 30] Does it glorify God through it? Does it point to Jesus? Well, this one does. And it does in a congregation that's very, very hostile.

Stephen is actually in court because he has been speaking about Jesus. And through that preaching, the false accusers say that he has blasphemed God and Moses. In fact, in 614, they claim that they heard him say that Jesus would replace, destroy this temple and he will change the customs which Moses delivered to us.

Well, this false trial, Stephen sees as a great chance to preach the gospel to a very, very resistant congregation. And he answers both charges in the process.

You see, the temple was loved by the Jewish people because the Psalms promised that it was the place where God would meet his people. But by the time of Stephen, this has turned into a false belief that God was somehow tied to the temple.

That it was the only place that he was truly present, where his glory resided. So when the temple was destroyed, then God had abandoned them. Their whole identity of the people of God is wrapped up in this temple.

[5 : 47] They're devoted to it in contrast to the devotion of the apostles to the word of God and prayer. But Stephen shows something very interesting through the Old Testament in this sermon, that God is not confined to his temple.

And he does it by looking at four parts of Israel's history, which I'm just going to look briefly at. And in those describing of the four parts of Israel's history, he ties God's power and his glory and his work to different places.

And in doing that, he's saying God does his powerful work in places that are far away from Israel and long before there was ever a temple. So in verses 2 through 8, he tells the council that God appeared to Abraham, who was living in a pagan country in what is now Iraq, far, far away from Israel.

And in that place, God comes crashing into his life and he speaks to him. And he promises him the covenant as well. And he sends Abraham out.

And of course, this is long before the temple. And then in verses 9 through 16, he turns to a second stage of history, he turns to Joseph. And he says, look at Joseph.

[7 : 04] Joseph was rescued out of all his affliction in Egypt. And God is with Joseph in Egypt. And then God saves Israel in Egypt.

In fact, they come there twice to receive food so that they would not die by starvation. The patriarchs are all saved. And this crucial part of God's saving work happens a long ways away from Israel.

And then thirdly, the longest section that Patty read, verses 17 through 44, Stephen talks about the giver of the law. He talks about Moses, this one who is the author of the things that the council is so devoted to.

Well, the people of God grew and multiplied in Egypt. And Moses became mighty in word and deed in Egypt. And then he grew and matured in the land of Midian, somewhere in between Israel and Egypt.

And then God spoke to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. And that is the situation where there is a burning bush. And in that presentation of God's power and glory, God does it in a place of wilderness and he says, you are standing on holy ground.

[8 : 22] Here is where holy ground is. And then in verse 36, God performs wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years, all far away from Israel.

And finally, the fourth stage of history that Stephen talks about is in verses 45 and 46. And there, he talks about David, about those who brought the people of God into Israel, including Joshua.

And it's very interesting that as Israel conquers the land and as David makes the country great, the temple is nowhere to be seen.

In fact, there is a tent of witness that goes around in the wilderness and then comes with Joshua and David into the promised land. All the times where God made this country great, the temple was nowhere to be seen.

It's not until Solomon that a fixed temple was built. And Isaiah, Stephen says in verses 49 and 50, prophesied that it's actually the universe that is God's temple.

[9 : 32] Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. What will you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hands make these things?

Did not my hands make all these things? God is saying here through that prophecy is that the temple cannot confine or imprison God.

There is no one place that contains God's glory. And in fact, Stephen is saying really the opposite thing. He is saying throughout all these Old Testament examples that God is present where his people are.

God is present where his people are faithful to him. His glory shines in the lives of these people who are far away from Israel long before the temple was built.

But amazingly, in Stephen's speech, he shows through the whole thing that the two people who rescue Israel are two people who are rejected by many people in Israel.

[10 : 37] So the patriarchs sell Joseph to Egypt out of jealousy. And when God reveals his law through Moses in verse 39, Israel refuses to obey him but thrusts him aside and in their hearts they turn to Egypt.

They want to go back to slavery. They reject the person that God has sent him, the one through whom God is working so powerfully. And at this point in the sermon, if they were all sleeping or starting to doze off a little and thinking about, yes, this is a very good recitation of our history, Stephen wakes them up.

And that's in verse 51. And he turns to them and he says, you are doing the same thing. And he talks about them in the same way that Moses talked about the people who turned against him, your stiff-necked people.

And they were resisting the Holy Spirit. They were resisting the very presence of God working powerfully through people like Moses. And then he says, remember in verse 37 that Moses promised to Israel that God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up.

Now Jesus taught that that prophecy was about him. And that's why Stephen says in verse 52, now you have betrayed and murdered the righteous one who Moses announced before him.

[12 : 04] You have betrayed and killed Jesus. So suddenly what is happening here is that Stephen changes positions. He's no longer the defendant.

He is the one who is bringing charges against the council. They have rejected the glory of God in Jesus. They, and not Stephen, have broken the law because they have murdered the only one who has kept the law.

They have killed the one person that God sent to rescue them and lead them into the paths of righteousness forever. That is his charge against them. The charge of the gospel.

And of course this enrages the council because they understood that they were devoted to maintaining the glory of God, protecting it in the temple. They were the ones who were charged with protecting the law as well.

But Stephen doesn't stop. And at that moment the heavens are open and he sees the glory of God. He sees God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he tells them that he sees Jesus alive and exalted to the place of God.

[13 : 15] He says the Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God. And that's a significant vision because really that vision is an illustration of the gospel.

Jesus has been rejected and killed but he is risen and he is God. He is Lord. And he does what the law and the temple were meant to do.

He brings people into the very presence of God as is happening in that vision with Stephen. That is the good news of Jesus. Those are the things that the law and the temple were pointing to all along.

It's shown in that vision of Jesus. Well, we've read the end of the story. It's not a good ending. The gospel offends the council so much that they scream and they stop their ears.

They say, I'm not listening. I'm not listening. And they drag him out to the outskirts of the city and there's this terrible mob scene where Stephen is executed by stoning. But in his death you see something very familiar because Stephen is so aware of the presence of God.

[14 : 25] He's so aware of Jesus in his life at that moment that he dies in the way that Jesus did. He asked Jesus to receive his spirit just as Jesus asked his father to receive his spirit.

And he asked Jesus to forgive those who are killing him just as Jesus asked the father to forgive those who were killing him. Last week I was talking about how Satan tries in any way he can to keep the church from speaking.

and in Stephen what we see in a shining way is a real witness to Jesus in a real courtroom in which he speaks. And in Stephen's vision Jesus stands up to acknowledge to actually receive what Stephen is doing to receive Stephen's witness.

And that's Jesus' promise from Luke 12. I tell you everyone who acknowledges me before people publicly the son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before people will be denied before the angels of God. Well Stephen was acknowledged before the angels of heaven because of his witness of an open mouth.

[15 : 42] Now in one way this day is a black day for the church. It says in chapter 8 verse 2 that there was deep grief over Stephen. They had lost somebody who was deeply loved and a very powerful leader and speaker for the gospel who also had a servant heart.

He meant everything to the church. Not only that but on the day of Stephen's death we see this great persecution arising and the church in Jerusalem is scattered out into Judea and Samaria.

But it's also a glorious day because those words Judea and Samaria are very familiar because Jesus' commission is to send the church into those places and then into the outer ends of the earth.

And Stephen had taught the church through his witness that God's presence was not tied to buildings or to land or to the ceremonies of the law but God's presence and his glory filled everyone who had faith in Jesus Christ.

So that every place in the world every place was holy ground. God's people were active witnesses in those places throughout the world and in those places was the holy place.

[16 : 54] And that truth really opened the eyes of the church. This wasn't a little movement just based in the holy city of Jerusalem anymore. It is actually worldwide in scope.

Wherever they were sent wherever they went they knew that God would work powerfully through them and their testimonies. And if you look at 8.4 you see that the people who were scattered didn't just go away and hide in fear they went about preaching the word.

And this is the way God's glory became known in places where the church wouldn't have imagined going before Stephen's death. And I want to close by saying that there's two things for us that I'd like to highlight from this sermon from this situation of Stephen.

And the first thing is that we need to know that this building that we're all sitting here this morning does not confine God. It's very tempting especially when there's a beautiful place of worship when the church building is something that is good to see and to be in.

We see that as the place of God. The place where God's presence resides. But also we need to understand that the truth is that each one of you is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

[18 : 15] everyone who has faith in Jesus is a beautiful temple. Paul says that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you in 1 Corinthians 6.

And so every place that you speak for Jesus' sake is a holy place. It is a place where God's presence is working powerfully. And they are places where God's glory shines through you.

And those places are places that look very familiar. They look like offices or living rooms or coffee shops or kitchens or boardrooms or walking paths.

And we need to look at ourselves in the way that Peter taught us to look at ourselves. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We need to understand ourselves as people who is the very present, the powerful presence of God is at work in the places where we go. And the second thing for us is that there will, in fact, be those who will reject the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives.

[19 : 26] And that's something we often become discouraged about. When people don't respond or when people misunderstand us or reject the gospel, we tend to shy away from speaking again.

But this was the experience of Stephen and of Peter and of Paul and of Jesus. It was the normal experience. The gospel does offend because it says that Jesus is Lord and you are not.

It says we are created and loved by God and he says we need a savior. We need to be forgiven. But Stephen also shows us that even when the gospel is rejected, even in this extreme way that he experienced, the gospel bears much fruit.

And so we cannot let rejection silence our witness. So I think that in many ways Stephen's vision encourages us when we are tempted to silence.

Because as with Stephen, every time you act on what you have seen in Jesus, he stands at the right hand of God and receives your witness. This is what Advent tells us, that we will see Jesus in all his glory.

[20 : 36] what will he say? Well, Jesus has promised to acknowledge you before the angels of heaven when you acknowledge him. He is faithful and he will do it.

Amen.