

New Story

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It is wonderful to be gathering with you again at St. Paul's in person and also online. If you've not met me before, my name is Steve Jeffrey. I'm a senior pastor here at St. Paul's, and it's my joy to continue our series in the book of Acts. And for the first time in ministry of nearly 30 years, I'm preaching on my namesake. And so I don't know how I've missed it, but I have no record of ever preaching on this passage before. So if you've got your Bibles there, it'd be wonderful if you open it up and follow it along with me. But as we begin, I want you to imagine two soldiers on a front line of battle in a moment of quietness as they sit in their trench late at night, gazing at the stars. They discuss why it is that they volunteered.

One says, I've got no job. I've got no wife, got no children, and I love adventure. And so I signed up. There is a world of difference between those two motives.

One is a daredevil who chooses to risk his life because he has nothing to live for in that moment. So hey, why not? The other risks his life because he has something so precious.

It's not only worth living for, but also dying for. When you've got something worth living for, you discover it's also worth dying for. And Acts chapter 6 verse 8 through to chapter 7, 60, this whole chunk, what we read here is the final day in the life of a man named Stephen.

[2 : 14] And Stephen's death revealed him to a man whose heart beat with Christ's heart to the very last. The name Stephen means a crown or a garland. The Greek word was used for the reward of a victor, given to a civic leader or to someone whose crown of glory was received because he was a victor at the Olympic Games. What a perfect name for a one who stood so tall on his final day and was crowned as the very first Christian martyr. Stephen shows us not only how to live well, but also how to die well.

Now, the length of this passage, I intend on exercising the gift of superficiality today. I'm not going to go through the whole text and replay the whole thing for you.

I plan to summarize it. I would encourage you to go away by the end of the day and read it. It's a great read, but I just want to just pick up three things really. So if you've got the St. Paul's app in front of you, I'd encourage you to open that up and you'll see the three things I want to get to.

I want to see what Stephen said. I want to see where his hope was placed and I want us to see what his death accomplished. They're the three things. So first of all, Stephen's speech, let's see what he said. Stephen was one of the seven chosen to distribute the food earlier on in chapter six to the widows. He's described there as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit and full of God's grace and power in verse six. So this is, you don't just pick meaningless, you know, task if you like. For everyone in the church, we want people with godly, godly character involved in all kinds of activities around the church. But here he is, he is hauled up in front of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and he's been accused of wrongdoing. The accusations are laid for us back in chapter six, verse 13 and 14. They produce false witnesses who testified, this fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us. And in chapter seven, verse one, the high priest asked Stephen if the charges that have been laid at him are true. And then Steve launches into this lengthy speech.

It's the longest in the book of Acts. Last week, we saw Peter's first and greater sermon. I referred to as Peter's first. This is Stephen's first and his last. This speech is Stephen answering those two accusations.

[5 : 20] That he speaks against the temple and against the law. So firstly, let's pick up those two things, the temple. And he responds by saying, in effect, this is my summary of it, the temple's not needed to meet God.

And he goes through a history of Israel. He says, remember Abraham? Abraham met God and he didn't have a temple. God was with Joseph in Egypt and there was no temple. There wasn't a temple when God met with Moses. It was at a burning bush in the wilderness.

And in verses 48 to 50, he makes a statement and then he quotes from Isaiah 66. Isaiah 66. That, of course, created a problem with the Old Testament law. No temple means no sacrifices for when you break the law, which means no meeting with God, no relationship with God.

And so Stephen then turns to the question of law obedience. And again, he traces through the history of Israel and he says, under Moses, you didn't obey the law.

[7 : 14] Under Aaron, you didn't obey the law. The prophet Amos says, you didn't obey the law. And Stephen declares here in his speech, the law is good.

He believes it is important and you cannot put it aside. You cannot ignore it in any way. And he says, the problem is you've never believed it. You've never obeyed it.

And he says, there's a problem here. There's a problem here for you who think that you are saved by obeying the law.

You've never obeyed it. His answer to his accusers is you don't need a temple to meet with God, but you do need to obey the law to meet with God.

And you never have. And you never can. And then he brings up something that he sees in the history of Israel that's key to everything that he says.

[8 : 25] He's launching into something that he's not been asked about. Stephen notices that in their history, every single time God sends a deliverer, that deliverer is rejected.

And they are persecuted by the very people that that deliverer was sent to save. From chapter 7, verse 9, he highlights Joseph.

Joseph was appointed by God to save his family from a severe famine, but his family sold him into slavery. Moses was appointed to deliver God's people from Egypt.

But verses 23 onwards, we read what happened when Moses tried to rescue God's people. Israel rejected him. And he had to flee to the wilderness to save his own life.

David is appointed king to lead God's people, but most of the time he's in the wilderness as a fugitive. Every time God sends a prophet, a deliverer, or a savior, the person is rejected and they are persecuted.

[9 : 38] And now, with incredible irony, Luke records in the last verse of chapter 6, the Sanhedrin. The word angel means messenger.

And that's what they did. That's what angels did. They relayed the word of God to God's people. And so the Sanhedrin are about to do what their forefathers have always done and rejected the messenger.

And then he brings all the threads together. And with no subtlety at all, he lays it home for us in chapter 7, verses 51 to 53.

You stiff-necked people. Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit.

Was there ever a prophet or an ancestor? Your ancestors did not persecute. They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.

[10 : 58] And you have received the law that was given through the angels, but not obeyed it. You see, verses 51 to 53 tell us the problem. Verse 52 is the solution to that problem.

51, he calls them stiff-necked and uncircumcised hearts, which simply means that they have got spiritually hard hearts. They do all the external compliance of the law as far as they're concerned, the rituals.

They care about the rituals. They care about the laws and the traditions. But their hearts are filled with fear, with pride, with cruelty. And none of it's worked because in verse 53, it says they haven't kept the law.

They haven't kept the law. What they need is new hearts. They need to be changed on the inside, in the core of their being. In verse 52, it's the summary of everything that he's been saying.

Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one, and now you have betrayed and murdered him.

[12 : 09] What Stephen has been saying in his speech is that he is all for the law of God, as they claim to be.

He knows, too, that we cannot be saved without fulfilling the requirements of the law. Total obedience to God is what's needed.

What's the solution? Verse 52. The one he refers to as the righteous one. It's pretty unusual for Jesus to be referred to like this.

It's pretty rare. The point he is making is that Jesus is the only one who has ever fulfilled the law. The only one to whom the law has no demands on.

Let me try and illustrate this a little bit for you. The street behind me here in View Street has signs up on it. It's got laws that say that you're allowed to park for two hours at a time between Monday and Friday.

[13:30] Two hours. That's it. If you park out there on View Street in Monday to Friday for two hours or under two hours, then you have fulfilled the law.

If, however, you park longer than two hours out there, Monday to Friday, then there is a fine associated with it.

And many people receive that fine. That is, if you park longer than two hours and receive the fine associated with that, the law has a hold on you.

You fulfill the View Street parking law by either obeying the law and not parking for longer than two hours or by paying the penalty for parking for longer than two hours.

If you do either of those two things, the law has no further claim on you. You are free. And what it's saying here is that Jesus fulfills God's law, God's standards and requirements for humanity, first of all, by never breaking them at all.

[14:50] Never breaks them. Love your neighbors yourself always completely fulfills that. Love the Lord your God, put him first, absolutely completely fills that.

Every other requirement of the law. He never broke God's standards. And no other human being has ever lived such a perfect life as Jesus Christ. That's historical.

Many have tried to pull apart his life to find the flaws, but have come up empty. Even in his own time, they question not just who this man is, but who is this man?

That can live like this. He is the righteous one. But he also fulfilled God's law in the second sense.

As the righteous one, he chose to go to the cross and be rejected. He was betrayed and denied. He suffered and died for our law breaking.

[15:49] He took our penalty. He paid our fine. He paid our price for our lawlessness and unrighteousness and rejection of him so that the law would have no hold on us if we trust in him.

He took the penalty that we deserve. He paid the price for our disobedience. And so instead of judgment and condemnation as law breakers, we are told in Romans chapter 8 that there is now no condemnation for those who trust in Christ Jesus.

The law of God has no further hold on you. There is not a price to be paid. And so Jesus fulfilled the law by being the climax to this whole pattern of saviors being rejected that Stephen talks about here in his speech.

The difference between Jesus and every other deliverer and saviour that came to Israel is that every other saviour delivered God's people despite the rejection and the suffering.

But Jesus delivered God's people through the suffering and the rejection and the death. And this is the good news of Christianity. It is the foundation of this church here at St. Paul's.

[17:13] We refer to it as the gospel. When an individual trusts in Jesus, puts their faith in Jesus, believes in him, then he becomes their righteousness.

All of our disobedience is given to Jesus and all of his righteousness is given to us. And in that sense, he becomes the temple.

He is the place where we meet with God. The temple isn't done away with at all. Jesus just fulfills all the requirements and the purpose of the temple. In his death on the cross, Jesus becomes the final sacrifice.

He is the bridge between God and humanity. And that's why it says in chapter 4 of Acts, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved.

So that's what Stephen said. Let's see where his hope was placed. Because this is in fact his hope.

[18:19] But let's look at it a bit deeper. Stephen's able to approach his suffering and death here like he does, not because of just what he knew in his head, but what he also saw in this moment.

Have a look at chapter 7, verses 54 to 56. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and they gnashed their teeth at him.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. And so the right hand of God is the divine courtroom.

This is a little different, however. Did you notice when I was reading it, the emphasis I put in there, there's a little different here in terms of description of what Stephen saw and what you will see generally in the New Testament.

[19 : 22] In other places, we are told that the resurrected, ascended Jesus, Lord Jesus Christ, is seated at the right hand of God because his work of reconciling humanity with God is finished.

The job's done. Here he is standing. When someone is standing in a courtroom, like in this sense, they are making an appeal of some description.

They're an advocate. In his commentary on Acts, FF Bruce makes this comment about this verse. He says, While Stephen was confessing Christ before men, he sees Christ confessing Stephen before God.

Stephen sees Jesus advocating for him in the divine courtroom. Jesus, the righteous one, has already paid the penalty for his unrighteousness.

He knows that he will never, ever from this moment ever be condemned, even as the Sanhedrin is condemning him. Imagine all of us, every single one of us here online, we've got this device attached to us.

[20 : 37] And this device records how you live your life. Every time, especially every time that we have looked down and ridiculed or put someone down because they have not lived up to our standards of living.

Imagine it recorded that. Every judgmental moment we have in life. And at the end of your life, just imagine that we all stand in a courtroom.

And the courtroom is judging us by our own standards. Just our own. Not society's standards, not God's standards. Just our own standards. And that device was removed and played.

Do you think it would reveal that we were guilty or innocent? The reality is, there's not a single person who even in that courtroom would be declared innocent.

Not a single person is able to live by their own standards of righteousness, let alone societies, let alone gods. All of us, every single human being, lower our standards faster than we can break them.

[21 : 52] Not a single person is innocent. And here is Stephen at the moment of his death, being condemned by the Sanhedrin, and he knew that in the divine courtroom he was being commended.

Commended. Just something he knew in his head, but something he saw in his heart as well. While one took his life, the other granted him life forever.

Jesus was the only one speaking up for him on that day, but that's all that mattered. In Jesus, he's innocent, guilt-free.

No one, no law could have any other claim on his life. This is not something he just knew as a logical fact. It's something that the Holy Spirit allowed him to see and to sense it, to savour it, to treasure it deep in his heart.

And as such, he approached his end with joy. So lastly, what did his life, his speech, his death accomplish?

[22 : 59] Have a look at chapter 8, verse 1. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Jesus had told his disciples on a number of occasions that the good news of salvation is not just for them, it's in fact for all of humanity. From here, centuries on, across every culture across the globe. This is news for all people. In fact, in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, we have the agenda for the book of Acts. In Jesus' last words to his disciples, he says, You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And up until chapter 8, they're still in Jerusalem. They hadn't taken the good news to different cultures and places, and God uses the death of Steve and the persecution that followed to push them out for his global agenda.

That's what it accomplished. But there's one really significant way that it was accomplished. Because there's one big question here.

[24 : 20] Where did Luke get the details of Stephen's lengthy speech from? Where did that information come from? Because he wasn't there himself.

Many commentators reckon it's the young man we're introduced to in verse 58. A man named Saul. Saul is given his consent to the stoning of Stephen. And in fact, we'll be one of the leaders as we look into chapter 8.

Leaders in persecuting the early church. Later in the book of Acts, he's called Paul. We will see his dramatic conversion to the Christian faith in a couple of chapters.

And scholars have pointed out that all the themes of Stephen's speech are the themes of Paul's theology. What Stephen said and how he died must have sunk deep into Saul's heart somewhere.

[25 : 28] It didn't change him right away. But something got under his skin. In fact, in Acts 26, when Paul is on trial himself for the Christian faith, he recounts how Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road and said to him, It is hard for you to kick against the goats.

It was an expression in his time that meant you cannot keep resisting a deity. Jesus comes and says, Paul, you cannot keep resisting me.

You cannot keep putting me off. For some time, Paul had been trying to hold Jesus at arm's length. Something got under his skin that was working its way in his heart. And he was resisting it. And scholars are in agreement that many scholars agree that it was here at this speech it began.

The seed was planted. Stephen did not have a very long life and didn't serve long in the early church.

[26 : 43] But his speech, his death changed the world. Not just his speech, but the way he suffered. He wasn't trembling in fear. He wasn't grinding his teeth with anger.

His calmness, his boldness are just incredible. He is praying for his murderers. Paul had never seen anyone die like this before.

And it must have cut him heart. And eventually through him, the history of the world is changed.

Stephen's death leads to an explosion of resurrection life to the ends of the earth through the centuries, across cultures as the sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ is held out as the hope of humanity.

And so I have to ask you before we go on any further, are you like Saul right now? Are you keeping Jesus at arm's length? Maybe you've heard about him. Maybe you wrestle with the truth of this, but you just keep holding them out there.

You cannot kick against the goats. Come to Jesus and resist him no more and find life forever. Jesus' suffering led to life.

[28 : 07] Stephen's suffering led to life. And so the suffering of everyone who trusts in Jesus leads to resurrection life and joy. If we know and do what Stephen knew and did.

Stephen looked to Jesus and what Jesus had accomplished for him. And we can have the same triumphant in life and death if we allow the Holy Spirit to get what we know to be true about Jesus and to push it down into our hearts and our affections.

We cannot find this kind of confidence in the world in which we live. Our society cannot provide a solution to handle death like Stephen has handled his in this moment.

In our society, the meaning of life is to have the freedom to live as you see fit. But if your ultimate meaning in life is God treasuring Jesus and his glory, then suffering and death cannot take that away from you.

It cannot get to your meaning of life. If, however, your meaning in life is to be free to live how you want to live and to pursue your own happiness, then suffering and death destroys your meaning of life.

[29 : 38] St. Augustine said that life is about ordering your loves properly. We all love things and we all love them in disordered ways.

He said our problem comes from the disordering of our loves. Someone once summarised Augustine on this by saying, only love of the immutable can bring tranquility.

Only love of the immutable can bring tranquility. Only when our highest love in life is something that can never, ever be taken away from you, will you ever find true tranquility, true peace.

Every single one of us left our own devices, sets our hearts on things that suffering and death will destroy. It's what our society does. Suffering and death will destroy them. And our meaning of life is

destroyed.

There is no peace. There is no tranquility when that happens. Only despair. And we must set our hearts on that which can never be taken away. Stephen's speech changed the world and it changed it for Paul and through Paul to the world.

[30 : 56] And Paul, known as Saul here, the same man who gave his consent to the murder of Stephen, later on in life, having met Jesus, wrote this to the church in Rome.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Come to the immutable Jesus, the unchanging, permanent Jesus, and find tranquility in life and death.