

Stephen (3) - The Martyr

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- [0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 7. This evening we're looking at the last part of chapter 7 and into chapter 8.
- As we consider Stephen, as we've been looking at him this evening, thinking of Stephen the martyr. Verse 54, we read these words. 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 open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.
- And so on. Well, as you look through the book of Acts up to this point, you see the early church being the witness to the Lord Jesus.
- And how initially everything seems to be going so well. You see an amazing growth in the early church. But how does that growth come about? Well, as you read through the chapters, you find that you see faithful people gathered together and praying to God.
- [1 : 1 5] You see people preaching the word of God, such as Peter on the day of Pentecost and thousands turning to the Lord. You think this is wonderful.
- This is great. What a blessing to see everything going so well and the church growing in this way. But as you continue to read through the book of Acts, and especially as you come to this passage, we've been looking at where we see Steve and you see another way the church grows.
- And it's a surprising way. And it's maybe not the way we would want the church to grow. But it's often the case that it is through persecution that the church will grow.
- And you read about that. Even Jesus himself mentioned that in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Beatitudes, where he says in verse 10 of Matthew 5, Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.
- [2 : 2 6] For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. And that's a message that Stephen has already reminded them of here.
- In verse 52, as we read, which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one.
- And you see so many similarities between Stephen and the Lord Jesus. And it's a reminder to us, Stephen, that this is what every Christian should desire to be like.
- To be more Christ-like. And so we come to the conclusion here of looking at Stephen's life by looking at Stephen the martyr. What we've seen of him so far is how he was chosen as one to serve tables.
- It doesn't sound very glamorous, and yet in it all, he was serving the Lord. He was a faithful man. He was full of the Spirit. And here, as we've seen in chapter 7, then we looked at the message that he brought to the people.

- [3 : 31] He presented to the people what they had done before God, how they had turned away from him, and their need to repent. We see now the reaction of the people when they heard these things.
- They were enraged. But what we see now is that even in his martyrdom, it is the Lord who is glorified. And indeed, as we see, the word is spread.
- The word martyr itself comes from the word witness. It is to witness. And that is what Stephen is doing here, is bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The Lord Jesus, who himself is described in Revelation chapter 1, verse 5, as Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. That word witness is where martyr comes from.
- And so here is Stephen the martyr, bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. The one who freed us from our sin by his death and by his resurrection.
- [4 : 42] And from the early church onwards, you see Christian martyrs such as Stephen, martyred for their faith and their witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, down through all the generations.
- In our own day, it's still the case that Christians are martyred around the world. As we thought of organizations such as Release International, Open Doors, Steadfast Global.
- Why is there a need for them? Because of the persecution the church is suffering. Places such as the Middle East, India, Nepal, many parts of Africa, North Korea.
- Christians are challenged on a daily basis to renounce their faith, to convert to other religions, to pay religious taxes. And ultimately many to face execution.
- But they remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. Because they know that there are greater blessings with him. It's not just about the here and now, as we sang in Psalm 23, the Lord with us through the peaceful times.
- [5 : 51] The Lord with us through that valley of the shadow of death. But our journey doesn't come to an end there. You see that in God's house, forevermore, there's a dwelling place for God's people.
- And that's what the life of Stephen encourages us by and reminds us of as well. So what can we take from Stephen this evening and his martyr, him being a martyr?
- Well, there's three things I want us to think about as we look at this. The wickedness of man, first of all. Then the grace of God in the midst of it all.
- And then the greater good that God can bring out of these things as well. So the first thing we see is the wickedness of man. Here is Stephen in the midst of his own life experience.
- He's facing up a crowd who are enraged and gnashing their teeth, grinding their teeth at him. But it says in verse 55, but he full of the Holy Spirit.
- [6 : 57] The Lord is with him. Just as he is going through that verse in Psalm 23. Yet though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He knows that the Lord is with him.
- That the Lord is near. And we'll see it as we go through it. Just how powerful his vision of the Lord is. But the first thing we notice here is the analogy of the shepherd leading his sheep.
- And how faithful the Lord is to Stephen here. And how precious a thing that is for ourselves this evening too. That we can take heart from the experience of Stephen here.
- That here he is. He has had a time of blessing seeing the church grow. That time when God has led him by the still waters. But here he is now going through this valley.
- This time where the shadow is drawing close. And yet here he is still so assured that the Lord is with him. He is full of the Holy Spirit.
- [8 : 04] And what our text this evening makes clear for us is the difference between Stephen who is trusting in the Lord. And those who are persecuting him.

You see those who have heard the message and they're enraged at what they've heard. They grind their teeth. They block their ears.

It says to us as well. And they rush him to take him out of the city to stone him. The gospel is so offensive to them.

They want no more to do with it. They want to hear nothing else from it. But when you look at verse 55, you see the great difference between Stephen.

And this is the way the Christian should be as well. That as we face up to many challenges in this world, a people who reject and even revile against the gospel.

[9 : 01] That this is how we are to be. This is our response. It says of Stephen, but he. In these simple words, it defines the difference.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. He was different.

He was a Christian. He knew Christ and he knew Christ with him. And he knew where to look. He looked up into heaven and saw the glory of God.

God, Satan does not sit idly by as the Lord is at work here in this world as well. Satan wants to snatch a people for himself.

He wants a people to turn and be enraged against the gospel. And God, even though he sees his people suffering such as Stephen here.

[10 : 01] This is the hard part for us. You think, why didn't he intervene? Why didn't he miraculously protect Stephen here? Why does he allow this choice young man to be cut down in his prime?

Well, it takes eyes of faith to see why. Because, as we'll see later, you see that even in the midst of this, the persecution, the suffering, the greater good of God goes on.

But what you're reminded of here, too, is that that is good for Stephen in it all. He knows that there is greater to come. He has this action here where he's calm, clear-headed, articulate, even kind towards the crowd as they rush to stone him.

But they are angry. They are gnarling at him. They're gnarling and grinding their teeth. They're so enraged. And this is just a reminder to us of the wickedness of man.

And how often we see this again and again. Things that we cannot understand. Suffering for God's people. That we sometimes think, why?

[11 : 17] Why this way? But down through every generation, we see man's inhumanity to man. Again and again, we're reminded of the evil of this world.

Time and again. You look in history, and it's there constantly for us. Every January, the 27th of January each year, is Holocaust Memorial Day.

As always, a powerful reminder to us of how evil mankind can be. Millions died in awful ways. And we cannot understand some of these things.

But we can learn that God is still with his people in it. And one survivor who you probably all heard of was Corrie Ten Boom. And how she spoke of the wickedness that she saw.

And many others have done likewise too. But also to see the love and grace of God in it all too. And she once said this. There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.

[12 : 30] And that's the way we sometimes have to look at things. To remind ourselves that in the wickedness of mankind in this world, there is no pit so deep that God's love cannot go deeper.

Regardless of the reason that hardship has come, every believer needs to be like Stephen here. A but he believer. That whatever is going on around us, whatever is going on even in our own experience, that we have this faithful view of Stephen.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. That we remind ourselves again and again that the Lord is with us always.

Just as Psalm 23, such a precious Psalm to us. You go through the valley, but there's always that destination at the end of it. That dwelling place with God.

And so as we ourselves, as we face up to the wickedness of man around us, whether it's in the distant lands where we pray for persecuted people, whether it's in our own nation, or even on our own doorstep, when we face up to the challenges that are around us through sin.

[13 : 48] That we don't respond with evil. That we don't respond like for like. That we make sure our eyes, our focus is fixed on the Lord.

That we seek to be a glorious witness for him day by day. Praying for faithful patience and grace to be his witness to all around us.

We have the wickedness of man all around us. But we're reminded certainly of the grace that overcomes. And we see what grace does in this passage.

Grace is illustrated in many different ways here for us. Remarkably, you see it in the people who are gathered around even stoning Stephen.

And there's one in particular who we see. And his name is Saul. And in just a few words in this passage, it says that as they stoned him, the witnesses laid down their garments, this is in verse 58, at the feet of a young man named Saul.

[14 : 59] All the people that were gathered around, he's the only one that's named. A young man named Saul. You see his name referenced then in chapter 8, verse 1.

And Saul approved of his execution. And from there, he continued to persecute. He continued to go on.

It says then in verse 3 of chapter 8, but Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

And you're beginning to think to yourself, how can grace be seen here in the person of Saul? And it's a reminder to us that when people view the grace of God at work, when people view Christians as Saul was viewing Stephen here, it doesn't mean that there's going to be an instant response.

In fact, if you look at Saul here, it says his heart's going harder. He's going the other way completely. He's becoming more and more determined to persecute the church. He's going around.

[16 : 14] He's dragging them out, men and women, committing them to prison. So it's as if he's going further away. And you're saying to yourself, how can any good come out of this?

Seems as if he's going further away. And yet, all you have to do is jump into chapter 9. And you see the grace of God.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord. He's still at it. But what happened?

He met with the Lord on the road to Damascus. And his life was transformed. As a reminder to us, even as we see a persecuted people around the world, whatever it is, in foreign lands, and even in our own lands, as we see such a contempt of the Christian faith just now and so many against the Christian faith, it seems to be getting worse.

It's not time to stop praying for them, but to pray even more that the persecutors would be like Saul, watching on, maybe seeming in our eyes to get worse, but that the Lord would meet them and transform them just like he transformed Saul by that wonderful grace.

[17 : 33] So we see grace at work in unbelievable ways here. We see also the grace God gives to Stephen. And you notice just how, we've sort of touched on this already, how the Lord is with him and with him in a remarkable way.

And you think of those who are present here, not watching on, but those who are present with Stephen. And when you read verse 55, it says, 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.

What do we have in that verse? We've got all the members of the Trinity. They're all there. He's full of the Holy Spirit, the comforter that Jesus had promised.

We see that he's looking up into heaven and he's seeing the glory of God. And at the right hand of God is Jesus, the Son, standing at the right hand of God. He's there standing, waiting for Stephen.

It's a remarkable image. And he goes on to say in verse 56, and he said, behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

[18 : 49] Now we often read of Jesus being at the right hand of God, but he sat, sitting at the right hand of God.

But here, he is at the right hand of God standing. So he's waiting just to welcome Stephen home. So we have them.

They're all there. They're all present. And what a view, what a vision he's got here. What he sees is remarkable. You know, we've marveled these last few weeks, some evenings, when we see the northern lights and how spectacular they are.

We lift up our gaze in the skies and you see these lights dancing in the skyline. And you think how amazing that is. And yet here, we see Stephen with a much more greater view than anyone could ever have with the northern lights.

He sees the glory of God. He sees it all as he lifts his eyes up to heaven. And even in his dying moment, you see the grace of God at work in him, at work through him.

[19 : 59] Look at the words that he sees. As he's in the throes of just the last moments of his life, he's seeing these things.

But he also has words to speak. And he says in verse 59, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And then in verse 60, he says, falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against him. And again, you think, where do these words, what do they remind us of?

The words of Christ as he was crucified. Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. And Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

They're so alike. And it's a reminder to us as well that this is how we are to be as well. We are committing ourselves into the Lord's hands, into the Lord's care at all times.

[21 : 03] And we are also to have that kind of attitude too. Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Forgive them for what they do.

Charles Spurgeon once said of Stephen's death that it was full of Jesus. It's full of Jesus' sin, he said.

It's full of Jesus' invoke that's called upon. It's full of Jesus' trusted. And it's full of Jesus imitated. And again, it's just such a powerful reminder to ourselves of the way we should seek to live our lives too, to be Christ-like and to know the grace of God in that way.

And that's the grace that he promises to you and to me. Grace for every occasion in life. Grace to live day by day.

Grace to witness grace to him day by day. Grace to die. But the Lord is with us.

[22 : 14] The grace of God is a remarkable thing. Finally, we see here too God's greater purpose in it all.

No one suffers for Christ in vain. that is a great truth that we see in Stephen's life and every Christian's life as well.

No one suffers for Christ in vain. Even as Stephen's life is taken from him here, God has a purpose in it all.

It was Tertullian, the early church father, who said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. In other words, that even through the death of the Christians over generations, that that would be the seed of the church.

That is where growth would come. And you see here that even as this persecution was done, something else happened as well. That the word of God spread.

[23 : 20] It says in verse 1 of chapter 8 that there arose on that day a great persecution against the church, and they were scattered throughout the regions. The Christians were scattered, but what happened as they were scattered?

Well, just go down to verse 4. Now, those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ, and there was much joy in that city.

it says. Even through Stephen's death, through his witness, through his life, the church bore fruit.

And you just think again of Saul and how he looked on at this stoning of Stephen and approved of it all. And yet this Saul who became Paul and who God used for the growth of the church over many, in many different places.

And you think of some of the words that Paul would later speak. And how different the words that he had been saying at this time when he says in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 58, therefore, my beloved brethren, my beloved brethren, those who he had persecuted, those who he had dragged out and committed to prison, they are now my beloved brethren.

[24 : 47] And he says to them, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

And you just wonder are these words linked to this, to Stephen's stoning, or looking back to the death of Christ.

And you think, how many thought that that was it, that was the end, when Christ was crucified, that will finish off the church, but no, it grew.

Or as Stephen is stoned, they're thinking this will put an end to the witness of the church, what happened? The seed was scattered. And so he says, your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

No matter what you are doing for the Lord, it is not in vain. There have been periods in our own nation where the Christian church would seem to have been cast away in so many places.

[25 : 57] And there was a time in the 1600s when many parts of Scotland saw martyrs in their lives taken because they would not turn their back on the Lord Jesus.

And our time in Dumfries was certainly a time when my eyes were opened to that, where there's many monuments to martyrs of the past. In the town centre near the bus station of Dumfries, there's a stone monument there.

And on it is the name James Kirko. And he was shot in the town there in May 1685. because of his faith in the Lord Jesus.

Then further down the coastline there's a town called Wigtown. And there near that town is a memorial to two ladies, two Margarets, who again were martyrs for the Christian faith, Margaret Wilson and Margaret McLaughlin.

And they would not turn their back on the Lord Jesus. And so they were tied to posts out in the sand where the Solway Firth comes in.

[27 : 13] And the tide was coming in upon them and rising up. And the soldiers were telling them to renounce their faith, but they wouldn't. Instead, they sang Psalm 25, even as the tide was coming up over their head.

And there they died for faith in the Lord Jesus. And that's not that long ago in our own nation. And we say to ourselves, we will never see days like that again.

But even if we do, do we not still have that great hope? That hope that is ours in Christ. John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress and other books, he spent 12 years in jail because of his faithful preaching of God's word.

And he once wrote this, he said, a smile or a kind look from Christ shall be worth more than 10,000 worlds. Again, he was reminding us to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus, to keep our eyes on him and to keep that day in mind when the Lord will come.

In 1 Peter 4, verse 14, it says, if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

[28 : 44] And that's what we see in Stephen. Even as he was stoned here, he gazed up to heaven and he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And that is the kind of Christian that we should strive to be as well. Every one of us to be faithful in whatever we are doing for the Lord, remembering our labor is not in vain.

Even when things seem to be going against us, God has a purpose and a plan in it all. And there's a greater good God at the end of it as well.

Just as Stephen saw the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God, so every Christian remembers that the Lord will welcome his people home.

That we might suffer in this world, but there is greater to come, and that is through faith in the Lord Jesus, the faith that we've seen in Stephen.

[29 : 50] Stephen the man who was a godly man and a wise man. Stephen's message was one of a real God to a real people. And Stephen the martyr saying, I looked, look, I see heaven open and the son of man standing at the right hand of God.

He saw the glory of God, but remember this, he saw people around him too, and his prayer was, Lord, do not hold this, against them.

So may we keep our eyes on the Lord Jesus, but keep our eyes on the world around us too, in a prayerful way, that they would not perish, but see the glory of God for themselves.

Amen. Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word and for the boldness of Stephen as we have seen so much of in this passage.

we pray, Lord, that you will fill us with that seal of emotion and devotion to those around him, longing, Lord, that they would know the glory of God in their lives, that that might be our prayer too for those around us.

[31 : 06] But too, Lord, we pray that you will keep us with our gaze, our vision fixed on Jesus, the one who has gone before us and prepared the way for us.

Lord, bless your word to us and pardon our sin in it all. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.