

Acts 7:17-57

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[0:00] Good morning. Glad you're here this morning. We are in our last week of a series that we've been preaching through this fall. Through the beginning of the book of Acts, we've called it when God builds his church. We're going to look at, in some ways, the end of the first section of the book of Acts. The narrative is being brought to a head where what God has done, beginning in Jerusalem, is about to be done. And God will then take it to the ends of the earth and in the rest of the book. But we're going to look this morning at the end of chapter 7. If you were here last week, you remember that Nick preached on the Deacon Stephen's sermon, where he proclaimed Jesus Christ to a ruling council. And he promised that I would come back this week and tell you a little bit more about the story, the narrative that surrounds that sermon. And so that's what we're going to look at this morning. And if you want to open your Bibles, you can turn to page 775. We're not going to read all of chapter 6 and 7 to renew it. But if you want to look along with me, starting in chapter 6, the story of Stephen is introduced to us in verse 5, and then his story begins in verse 8. And what we see in verses 8 through the end of the chapter 6 is we see God doing great things, signs and wonders through this man as he's proclaiming Christ. And we see that this proclamation is provoking a great reaction. Again, both Greg and Nick have given us some orientation to what's going on.

But certain people in Jerusalem started to be threatened by his message. And they started to take action against him. They instigated witnesses to bear testimony against him. They instigated, in fact it says false witnesses, to say things about him before the ruling authorities in order to shut him up, in order to keep, make him silent. And at the end of chapter 6, you see Stephen dragged before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. And his life, his very life, is on trial. It is a dire situation. The pressure is about as great as you could imagine. What does Stephen do then? Before I go on, I just want to stop and ask you the question, what do you do? What do you do when the pressure in your life seems unbearable, overwhelming? Whether it's the pressure you face from your external circumstances, financial pressures, conflict with those you love and who are close to you, an unbearable schedule that overwhelms you.

Maybe it's facing your own failure and sin, and your guilt feels unbearable. When you face these situations, when you face opposition, when people treat you badly, when they oppose you because you have claimed the name of Christ, how do you stand?

Stephen is asked the question beginning of chapter 7, what do you say to these charges?

And Stephen preaches this beautiful sermon that Nick explained last week. And the very gist of it is this, Jesus is the fulfillment of everything you have ever hoped for. Do you want to know how to live for God? Jesus is the answer. Do you want to know how to meet with God? Jesus is the answer. Not the temple, not the law. These things were pointing ahead to Jesus as the fulfillment and the centerpiece and the pinnacle of all that God has done throughout all of history. And then at the very end, Stephen pulls no punches to his audience. If you want to look with me in verse 51, this is what he says to those that oppose him. You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?

[5:41] They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. You who received the law and is put into effect through the angels, but have not obeyed it.

With boldness, Stephen brings to bear on his audience. How great Jesus is and how great their offense is for rejecting him. And this sets up the text that we're going to look at closely today.

This is the story of Stephen up to this point. And it's been building and we're about to reach the high point of the narrative. Let me pray and then we'll read it together and go on from there.

Lord, thank you for your word. Thank you that in it, you have revealed yourself to us. God, we do not have to wonder who you are or how to know you, but God, you have made yourself known.

You have said, this is who I am. And Lord, you have called us to respond to your word with faith, with hearing, with obedience. And Lord, I pray that for us this morning.

[7:13] I pray that by your spirit, Lord, your word would become clear through my words. And Lord, that you would speak to all of our hearts. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

So as we step into this text, how will they respond? Starting in verse 54. When he had heard this, when they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up into 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 at this, they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, as they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he fell on his knees and he cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Well, what was the response of the people when Stephen said, you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears? Well, would be what most of us would respond, don't you think?

They were furious. They were angry. It cut them to the very core of their being, and their response was violent and full of hatred.

[9:05] But Stephen, and notice this, where is Stephen's attention at this point?

If I had been him, I would have wanted to figure out where the nearest door was, figure out who is going to help protect me. I'd have a sense, man, this is going to be the end, and I want to figure out how that's not going to happen. That's what I'd be thinking. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, that is, Luke is reminding us, God is with him. God is in him. God is leading him to respond in this situation.

God is looking for his eyes. He's looking for his Lord. And what does he see? He sees the glory of God, God. Which calls to mind, in Exodus 34, when Moses asked to see the glory of God. God said, no, you cannot see it or you will die. But let me show you just a little bit of it. And as God passes by, he proclaims his name, the Lord. The Lord who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty. To see the glory of God is to see this God who is rich in mercy and grace. And he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, the right hand of God. And then as he proclaims it in the next verse, he says it's the Son of Man.

And so Stephen is bringing all of these great Old Testament images together. The Son of Man, recalling from the book of Daniel, one who is given authority, glory and sovereign power.

All peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.

[11:38] And this one is at the right hand of God. Recalling to mind the promise and the statement in Psalm 110.

The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. Stephen looks up into the heavenly throne room. He sees Jesus with all this authority, with all this promise, with all this position.

And the people, they can't bear it. They can't stand it. They can't hear it. It says they literally stuff their ears and go, la la la la la la la la la. I'm not going to listen to this. It was so offensive to them.

They were actually obeying part of the Jewish tradition in the first century that to listen to blasphemy was such an offense that they would, la la la la la, so they could not hear someone speaking badly of God. They stuffed their ears and they yelled at the top of their lungs and then they rushed at him.

And the narrative is so terse here. They dragged him out of the city again in obedience to Mosaic law, the punishment for blasphemy.

[13:09] They dragged him out of the city and they began to stone him. And the story concludes with Stephen reminding us of Jesus when he died, yeah?

Saying, Lord, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And then when he was done, he died.

And that's the basic story that we see here. And the centerpiece of it, I believe, the centerpiece of what Stephen, Stephen's story is meant to teach us as followers of Jesus, as his church.

It's in verses 55 and 56. Look again. It's in this vision. In the hardest of times, what is it that he sets his eyes on? He sets his eyes on Jesus.

And specifically, not just Jesus, meek and mild, Jesus who loves everybody, but Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father.

[14:24] And seeing Christ Jesus standing like this made all the difference to him. Why? I think there are three reasons and then I have three applications for you.

Why did Stephen seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God make all the difference? Three reasons. The first one is that seeing Jesus in this position means that Jesus has all the authority.

There is no authority. There is no boss. There is no government. There is no playground bully. There is no circumstance that has greater authority than Jesus Christ.

It also means that Jesus is the ultimate mediator between God and man.

Jesus standing at the right hand of God, particularly in the book of Hebrews, is a picture of Jesus the high priest having offered the perfect sacrifice of his own blood to cover over your sins and mine.

[15:43] It's the very core of the gospel that Jesus stands at the right hand of the Father as an intercessor for us. He stands between us. And if we stood before God on our own merit, we would only face condemnation.

We are stiff-necked. We are uncircumcised in heart and ears just like the people Stephen was preaching to. But God in his mercy has offered a perfect sacrifice.

God in his mercy has raised up a great high priest. And now these things stand for us. And Christ stands for us in the heavenly courtroom.

And instead of wrath, we receive love and grace and mercy and acceptance from God the Father. So the three reasons why this is so wonderful because Jesus has all authority because Jesus is the ultimate mediator and finally because Jesus is standing.

For those of you who have been listening carefully, you might have noticed it. Psalm 110 says, sit at my right hand. But Jesus is standing. Why is Jesus standing?

[17:05] Jesus is standing because he is looking at Stephen and he has stood to honor him and to welcome him. This whole scene shows that everyone knows Stephen is going to die.

and Jesus stands up and he says, I see you Stephen and I honor you and I welcome you and you will be here in the same way that you stand when a guest walks into your house.

Jesus stands in the courtroom of God for us. Jesus is the ultimate authority.

Jesus is the ultimate intercessor and Jesus stands in welcome and honor. And for Stephen, these things made all the difference.

And they can for us too. Three things. when Christ stands for us, no human authority or situation can stop us from standing firm in witness for Jesus Christ.

[18:28] Stephen didn't shrink back in the face of this great trial. I would have. I would have been afraid. If they had asked me, are these things true of you like they did in chapter 7 verse 1, I would have said, well, let me explain.

Let me try to massage this situation because, man, I don't, I'm really not sure I want to die. This looks pretty bad. It would have been so easy to be afraid.

But Stephen looked at them and he said, you have no authority over me and what happens to me. Jesus is the ultimate authority in my life. And so he boldly and gladly provokes his hearers by presenting the greater glory of Christ.

It might be that Jesus having ultimate authority, excuse me, it might be that Jesus having the ultimate authority has the power to help us because I might be afraid, but I also might just fall into self-pity and self-absorption.

If I was Stephen, I would have been, I would have been thinking, God, how could you let me do this? I'm faithfully serving you here. I'm trying to proclaim you.

[19:53] How could you let it get this bad? You have ultimate authority. Why didn't you help me? But Jesus having ultimate authority gives us the confidence that no matter how hard our circumstances are, no matter how great the cost might be, Jesus knows.

He has authority. He hasn't surrendered you to something that he can't save you from or that he can't sustain you through.

Jesus' ultimate authority gives him the power to be bold and faithful in witness, to be confident that no other authority and no other circumstance is greater than the one that he had fixed his eyes on in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, think today. What authorities or circumstances are in your life? How are you responding to them?

This account of Stephen encourages us to lift our eyes and look again to Jesus. Jesus. The second thing that Stephen sees that we also need to see and that can mean everything for us is that Jesus stands as the ultimate mediator, the ultimate intercessor.

[21:34] In verse 59, it's fascinating, isn't it? Stephen says, Lord, receive my spirit. And part of this was echoing and reminding those there of Jesus' words when he had said something similar as he hung on the cross.

But just like Jesus, this is not a wish, this is not a desperate plea. Oh, please, would you try to do something?

This is a statement of confidence. Lord, receive my spirit. I am yours, take me now. my time here is done.

How could he say that? Because he knows that Jesus' blood and righteousness is enough for him. And friends, this is true for us, too.

Jesus' blood and righteousness are enough for us. when we face guilt because of our sin, when we are ashamed of our weakness, of our failure, we might be ashamed of something that our culture esteems that we don't have, like intellectual prowess or money, or the proper family picture, we might have things that truly are shameful in our lives, that we've never let the light of Christ into, things that we hide, things that we've never been able to tell anyone.

[23 : 33] Jesus' blood and Jesus' righteousness stands for us in that moment. And God sees these things, and God, because of Christ, because Christ stands for us, he says, you are not guilty, do not be ashamed, but stand before me in Christ and know that I have forgiven you and that I love you.

now I have said all this, but I want to be clear. For those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, for those who have abandoned their hope of being right before God on their own merits, abandon any trust in being good enough that God would think we are okay by how well we do, these things are true.

but notice that Stephen's audience were people who were desperately trying to hold on to the Mosaic Law in particular ways so that they would be right with God by the things that they do, by trusting in themselves.

And if you were here this morning and you were thinking, how can I be good enough to please God? Then I want you to hear clearly the call that Stephen gives.

you can't be, but Jesus is. Repent of your self-justifying before God.

[25 : 07] Repent of trying to be good enough before God and receive Jesus Christ standing before God on your behalf and stand in his righteousness by faith, by placing all of your hope and trust in him and what he has done for you.

And when we have that, oh, brothers and sisters, what a great joy it is. When we stand freely before God in Christ's righteousness, we have no more fear.

We have no, we can stop, we can stop running on the, hamster wheel of performance to build identity and significance on what we do.

We can stop comparing ourselves and wondering, are we good enough that someone else will accept us and like us because we fit in well enough in our culture, whether it be at school or in the workplace, even in our own homes.

We don't have to struggle with the despair when we see we're not good enough.

[26 : 30] We have great freedom and confidence in Christ because he stands before us and that makes all the difference. And finally, when Christ stands for us, we can no longer live for ourselves but live for others.

Stephen's last words are not about himself. Stephen's last concern is not, hey, now I get to go to heaven or ow, that hurts or whatever we might be thinking.

His last thought was for the people who were stoning him. Lord, don't hold this sin against them.

Will you extend the forgiveness that's in Christ even to these? And he can do this because Christ is his ultimate authority and his ultimate standing before God.

God, he can be concerned about others because he stands secure in Christ. And that's true for us too.

[27 : 48] We are able to love when we don't have to take care of ourselves anymore because Christ will take care of us. We are able to give even sacrificially because we know that Christ has ultimate authority to provide for all of our needs.

we don't have to protect ourselves or defend ourselves because Christ stands for us. And that enables us to love.

And this is why Luke includes Saul in this little account. Did you notice him in the story? This man named Saul that they laid cloaks at.

You think, why is he there? Who is it? He's never been introduced before in the Bible. Who is this guy? And then at the end in 8.1, and he approved of these things.

It seemed that Saul had a role of overseeing this mob lynching of Stephen. And it goes on in the next couple of verses to say that he had great zeal in persecuting the church.

[28:59] And he dragged people into prison. And he had them killed. And he was the greatest enemy of the early church that is recorded in scripture as far as we know. But Luke is setting up the fulfillment of this very prayer.

Lord, do not hold this sin against them in the life of the worst enemy of the church. Because Saul will go on and he too will be met by Jesus.

and Jesus will open his eyes to see him as he really is. And Saul will become the apostle Paul. And the proclamation of Christ will go to the ends of the earth.

And Paul will lay down his life in love because of Christ. Friends, this is the end of our series in Acts.

There's a part of me that wished we would have preached a lot more about evangelism and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ because it is throughout this entire section that we have looked at.

[30:24] And it is at the very end of this section that we've just looked at that this loving proclamation of a Savior who died for us. This is the mission of the church.

This is the mission of our church here in New Haven. and to the ends of the earth. And I want us to be that kind of church.

But I believe that we will be that kind of church when we have a vision of Christ like we have seen in the first seven chapters of Acts.

When we can see Christ the way the early church did. God will build his church and we will proclaim him. When we see Christ those of you who have been here for the whole sermon series you may recall to mind the passages we've studied.

Jesus Christ is the crucified Lord and risen Savior. Jesus Christ is the author of life. Jesus Christ is a name the only name under heaven by which we may be saved.

[31:39] By which we must be saved. Jesus is the rejected one that God exalted to his right hand to offer repentance and forgiveness of sin. Jesus the fulfillment of the temple and the law and here Jesus the son of man standing at the right hand of God standing for us.

And so in closing my prayer is that we may follow the exhortation of the reading earlier in Hebrews. That we may fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith.

That we too like Stephen may fix our gaze upon him and see him. See him who did not count the shame of the cross.

Here's the words in Hebrews. Who for the joy set before him endured the cross scoring its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

let us consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that we will not grow weary and lose hearts.

[33:12] Let's pray. Lord we come to you this morning and ask Lord that by your spirit you would give us a vision again of who you are.

Jesus we worship you as the one who stands at the right hand of God. Lord you have all authority and power and dominion.

Lord may we see that. May we respond in faith and confidence and hope and boldness in proclaiming you. Lord will you build your church with a vision of your greatness.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.