

The Judgement of Stephen

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[0 : 0 0] That's why I thought I'd better do it myself. That was great. Did you enjoy? Did you enjoy? Thank you. I've got a fan at the back. I think it would be nice if Stuart came back again sometime and did another talk, don't you?

Now, apologies to the younger ones. But you older ones will maybe remember. Because what Stuart reminded me of when he was doing his faces was the Reverend I.M. Jolly.

Do you remember him? That was very good. Okay, well, we've got a reading today from Acts chapter 6. And if you've got your Bibles, you can follow me.

It's a fairly long reading, but important. So we'll start it. Chapter 6, and then we'll be a few verses in chapter 7 too.

In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews amongst them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

[1 : 1 3] So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. This proposal pleased the whole group.

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the Word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs amongst the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.

[2 : 2 6] These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses who testified, This fellow never stopped 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.

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, Are these charges true?

Then, of course, Stephen goes on to do a very long talk on the history of Israel. And then he finishes, If we look to verse 51 of chapter 7, He concludes his speech, When they heard this, They were furious, They were furious, And 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.

[4 : 22] At this they covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, 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 Stephen, while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell on his knees, and cried out, Lord, do not hold this sin against him.

When he had said this, he fell asleep. So our next hymn is, Speak, O Lord, as we come to you. Speak, O Lord, as we come to you, to receive the food of your holy words.

Take your truth, plant it deep in us, shape and fashion us in your likeness, that the light of Christ might be seen today in our hands of love and our deeds of faith.

Speak, O Lord, and fulfill in us all your purposes for your glory. Teach us, Lord, and fulfill in us all the reverence through humility.

[6 : 17] Test our thoughts and our attitudes in the radiance of your purity. Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see your majestic love and authority.

Words of power that cannot truth prevail or unbeen. speak, O Lord, and renew my heart of your plans for us.

To choose and change from the dawn of time and pull ever down through eternity. and my grace will stand on your promises and my faith will walk as you want with us.

Speak, O Lord, till your church is built and the earth is filled with your glory. and my grace will stand on your promises and my faith will walk as you want with us.

Speak, O Lord, till your church is built and the earth is filled with your glory. I just have to start with a slight apology.

[8 : 19] Last week I said something and I assumed that everybody knew. I mentioned when I was in jail. So one of the ladies told me afterwards, you have to remind people that you were a prison officer because not everybody knows.

So there we go. 20 years in jail but not for what you think. Okay. We're going to look at this story about Stephen this morning.

When the Spirit of God fell upon Jesus' disciples on the day of Pentecost and they all began to speak in tongues, the commotion attracted a great many people. Jews from all over the empire who had come to Jerusalem for the feast heard the disciples praise God in their various languages.

As a result of the message that Peter went on to preach, that day 3,000 souls were won to Christ. From that moment, the body of believers began to grow rapidly as the Lord added to their numbers daily on a daily basis.

Acts 2, verses 46 and 47 informs us that the new believers broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and, we are told, they enjoyed the favor of all the people.

[9 : 38] That favor did not, however, last. Although the rulers had always opposed the new movement, within a few short years it seems that the people also began to turn on the Christians or the people of the way, as Jesus' disciples were first called.

This hostility began to become more extreme. We saw last week that one of the reasons that the author of Hebrews wrote his letter was to encourage Jewish believers in Jesus to remain faithful to him in the face of growing hostility and persecution from their fellow Jews.

When we read two of Paul's missionary journeys in Acts, we see that he too was often opposed, sometimes violently, when he proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and Lord in the synagogues he visited.

But in Jerusalem, the hostility that began to break out against the believers eventually led to the willful killing of the young man Stephen in order to silence him, as we heard in our reading this morning.

Incidentally, although hostility to the gospel remains a reality amongst Jews today, especially perhaps in Israel, it is heartening to see God at work as a growing number of Jewish men and women are acknowledging Jesus as their Messiah.

[11 : 00] And it's great. if you ever go on YouTube and have a look at One for Israel, there's some tremendous testimonies. Now, it's always helpful when a sermon has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

So here is where we're going. To begin with, we're going to look at who Stephen is. Then we will look at the events that led up to his trial and execution, together with the implications that came from that.

And I will conclude by drawing lessons from the story of Stephen that we can apply to ourselves. So who was Stephen? Stephen is, of course, famous for being the first Christian martyr.

But as we saw from our reading, he was also one of the seven original deacons ordained by the apostles to serve the needs of the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking widows in the early church in Jerusalem.

For those denominations that follow a Christian calendar, his feast day is celebrated on the 26th or 27th of December, which is why the popular Christmas carol says that snow lay round about when good King Wences last looked out on the feast of Stephen.

[12 : 12] Although his ministry was short-lived, Stephen's importance is seen in the fact that Luke devotes two full chapters of Acts to him, including 53 verses to his speech before the Sanhedrin, which is twice as many as he devotes to Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost and is substantially more than is given to any of Paul's recorded speeches in Acts, which is why, for the sake of brevity, we skipped over most of his speech in our reading and included only its final part.

Now, the first things to notice is that Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew of the Diaspora. We know this because when the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, the apostles asked them to choose seven men from amongst themselves, that is, from their own community, to take on the responsibility of looking after the widows.

This would explain his connection with the synagogue of the freedmen, so-called because its members were by and large Jews from the empire who had been slaves who had been slaves but had obtained their freedom.

They, like Stephen, would have been Greek speakers, for Luke tells us in verse 9 of chapter 6 that they were originally from Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.

So how did Stephen, as a foreign-born Jew and a believer in Jesus, come to be part of the early church in Jerusalem? Given that the events leading up to his death, scholars tell us, took place within no more than about five years from the death and resurrection of the Lord.

[13 : 54] Well, we have no way of knowing exactly, but in my humble opinion, I think that it's likely that he was one of the God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven that, in Acts chapter 2, Luke says, were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and who, hearing Peter preach to preach about Jesus, consequently believed were baptized and that day were added to the church.

So what events led up to his demise? Although Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to look after the needs of the Hellenistic widows in the daily distribution of food, his ministry, we find, was not limited to waiting on tables because, according to Acts chapter 6 and verse 8, Stephen, full of grace and power, was also doing great wonders and signs amongst the people, which is pretty phenomenal, really.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had deacons like that in our churches today? As well as this, it's clear from the accusations that were later brought against him that he was proclaiming Jesus to the Greek-speaking Jewish community in Jerusalem because we are told that men from that synagogue of the freedmen rose up and disputed with Stephen.

But Luke says that they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Now, there's a modern saying, if you cannot play the ball, play the man.

So that's what they did. Last week we heard that we have to stir one another to love and good deeds, but these men did the opposite. They stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law against Stephen and seizing him brought him before the Sanhedrin.

[15 : 42] They produced false witnesses who testified against him saying, this fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law for we have heard them say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.

But despite their accusations, as he stood in the dock as it were, with all eyes on him, Luke comments, all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

What a testimony. When the judges question him and ask him, are these charges true? Their question is, of course, followed by Stephen's reply, which scholars say was Jewish in its concerns, but in form followed Greek rhetorical conventions.

Again, not surprising giving his background. In his reply, Stephen details the history of Israel from Abraham through Moses to their present day, but in his closing remark, he turns his attention to all those present, accusing his accusers of their hardness of heart towards God and their rejection and condemnation of his son, the Lord Jesus.

For it must be said that given the short time that had elapsed since the death and resurrection of the Lord, the Sanhedrin before whom Stephen stood would have been substantially the same people who had condemned Jesus.

[17 : 18] furious as they were by this, they became even more incensed when Stephen cried out, Look, I see heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God and stopping their ears, we are told, they dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death.

But following the example of his Saviour, who as he was being crucified, prayed, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Stephen, before he died, prayed, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Someone has said that what marks the Christian faith out from other religions is that we pray for our enemies. Although the Romans reserved exclusively the right of capital punishment in conquered countries, which is why Jesus was brought to Pilate to be crucified, Pilate had this time been recalled to Rome and replaced temporarily by a lesser official.

And so the crowd taking advantage of the situation executed Stephen, putting him to death by stoning, by stoning him outside the city as the law of Moses stipulated.

Now, if I asked you who was it that was on trial that day, you would obviously say Stephen. However, that is only partly true.

[18 : 50] The Sanhedrin which sat in judgment on Stephen was the highest court in the land, although it operated under the authority of Rome. But what men often don't realize is that there is yet a higher court of authority.

An ultimate authority that sits in judgment on all of us. That authority is, of course, the court of heaven where God sits as judge. There is no greater authority and there is no court of appeal from that court, apart from the one exception, which is when the repentant sinner finds in Christ an advocate to intercede on his behalf.

In the events leading up to the trial and eventual stoning of Stephen, there were many actors, and each one, although they did not know it, was on trial that day.

First were the men who started this chain of events, the men from the synagogue of Freedmen. It's quite clear that these men had willfully rejected the truth that Stephen preached concerning Jesus, despite being unable to refute his claims.

So they secretly procured false witnesses against him. But as Jews and members of the synagogue, they would have been more than familiar with the Ten Commandments, one of which clearly states, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

[20 : 21] Yet that is exactly what they did. For the very same reason, those witnesses they enlisted to knowingly, falsely testify in court, were also guilty. Also on trial that day before God were the crowd, who were too quick to believe Stephen's accusers, so failed to listen to his side of the story, or treat him as innocent until proven guilty, but seized him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, and afterwards took part in his stoning.

Then there was the Sanhedrin itself, consisting of the high priest and seventy others, who were either priests or scribes or elders. Although they followed due process by asking Stephen concerning the accusations against him, are these charges true?

In other words, do you plead guilty or not guilty? It's obvious that they too already had made up their mind of Stephen's guilt. And when the crowd, in violation of both Jewish and Roman law, and before sentence could be passed, dragged Stephen outside the city to stone him, they made no attempt to intervene.

I cannot imagine such a scene taking place at the high court in Edinburgh, an accused man dragged into the street by members of the public and summarily murdered.

But that's what happened. So everyone who played a part, however small, in condemning Stephen that day, was guilty before God. Even the young man Saul, who witnessed all this but took no part in the trial or execution, bore also his share of the guilt.

[21 : 59] As Paul the apostle, he would later admit that he was, at the time, approving of Stephen's death. The only one amongst them who was innocent was the one they killed.

So we looked at who Stephen is, and we've looked at the events surrounding his death, including the implications for all involved. Finally, what are the lessons that we can learn from all of this?

Well, I think there's a big lesson here, and it's about judging others. Now, of course, Jesus has said in Matthew 7, verse 1-2, do not judge, or you too will be judged, for in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged.

Now, it's impossible, of course, to avoid making judgments altogether, for policemen, for the judge that sits in the court, or for parents, that is part of the job. But I think what Jesus is saying is, where possible, avoid judging others, but if you do, be careful how you judge, for God is watching.

Therefore, at the same time that you are judging others, he is judging you. So I would suggest three rules to follow when making judgments about others. Firstly, do not judge harshly.

- [23 : 24] Remember Jesus' words, in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged. Remember that you are not perfect either, so it may be that compassion, not criticism, is what is needed.

Consider Jesus' treatment of the woman taken in adultery. There is no question that she was guilty, guilty as charged, and that the law said she should be stoned.

But having dealt with her accusers, who were, of course, not concerned to see justice done anyway, but only wanted to present Jesus with a dilemma that they thought he could not resolve satisfactorily, he then showed her mercy and let her leave with a warning to go and sin no more.

It is easy to find fault with the failures of others, but better if we can do as Paul says in Galatians 6 verse 1-2, if anyone is caught in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness, keeping watch on yourself lest you too be tempted, bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Secondly, do not judge hastily. And by the way, what I say to you, I have to say to myself. There are usually two sides to their story.

- [24 : 49] Better to give the benefit of the doubt until you can reasonably ascertain all the facts. In chapter 1 of 1 Samuel, we read of Hannah, who with her husband Elkanah and his wife Penina were making their annual visit to the tabernacle of the Lord at Shiloh.

Deeply distressed that unlike Penina, she had no children, Hannah was praying and weeping before God. In verse 12 to 15 of that chapter, we read, As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth.

Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk, and said to her, How long are you going to stay drunk?

Put away your wine. Not so, my Lord, Hannah said. I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.

Eli was too quick to judge. He made an assumption that proved to be completely wrong. Thirdly, do not judge hypocritically.

- [25 : 59] Jesus Jesus tells us that if we take the plank out of our own eye, then we will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of our brother or sister's eye.

We judge hypocritically when we say, do as I say, not as I do. Paul's writing to the Romans and addressing the Jewish Christians in particular, although what he says could just as easily apply to us, says, if you're convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Although we have seen that Jesus was compassionate towards an adulteress, nothing made him more angry than hypocrisy, especially from those claiming to be religious. His greatest anger was not vented against the tax collectors and harlots, but against the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.

So don't judge harshly, hastily, or hypocritically. And be aware that attitudes like envy, jealousy, prejudice, or pettiness cloud our judgment.

[27 : 33] How often in church do people fall out over lesser important things like hymns and flowers or something like someone sitting in the seat where I always sit, when there are far more important things to concern ourselves with.

A judgmental attitude is a hindrance to ourselves and to others. It undermines the unity of the church. It is unchristlike and unspiritual.

So let us avoid judging others so that we will not be judged. But if or when we do judge, let us aim to do as Jesus commands in John 7 24, and judge righteously.

We too easily judge after the flesh, whereas as if we judged in the spirit, we would not be condemned. Stephen 2, we must not forget, also judged that day, condemning those before whom he stood for rejecting the Son of God.

The difference was that although the world condemned him, he was, however, justified before God, whereas his accusers were not.

[28 : 44] and in 1 Corinthians 2 verses 15 to 16, which we'll finish with, that tells us why. For it says, and listen to this, this is a most profound statement.

Let this sink in. The spiritual man or woman judges all things, but he himself is not subject to anyone's judgment.

For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. The spiritual man judges all things, but he himself is not subject to anyone's judgment.

When we do not judge harshly or hastily or hypocritically, when we seek the mind of Christ in a matter, we can judge all things without being ourselves subject to anyone's judgment.

Amen. Amen. Now we're going to come to communion and our next hymn, The Power of the Cross. Lord, to go to heaven, those heaven come to Oh, to see the dawn of the darkest day Christ on the road to Calvary Tried by sinful men Torn, beaten, nailed to a cross of wood

[30 : 48] This the power of the cross Price became sin for us Took the blame, bore the wrath Released and forgiven at the cross Oh, to see the pain written on your face Bearing the awesome weight of sin Every bitter thought Every evil dream Burning your blood's dead brow This the power of the cross

Christ became sin for us Took the blame, bore the wrath Released and forgiven at the cross I'll just stay here for the readings because I don't have a microphone on I'm going to first read from Isaiah chapter 53 and then we'll read from Corinthians Who has believed our message?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot And like a root out of a dry ground He has no beauty or majesty to attract us to him Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him He was despised and rejected by men A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering Like one from whom men hid their faces He was despised and we esteemed him not Yet surely he took up our infirmities And carried our sorrows Yet we considered him stricken by God Smitten by him and afflicted But he was pierced for our transgressions He was crushed for our iniquities The punishment that brought us peace was upon him And by his wounds we are healed We all like sheep have gone astray Each of us has turned to his own way And the Lord has laid on him The iniquity of us all As we come to communion

I'll read from 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and verse 17 Eh sorry 25 For I received from the Lord What I also passed on to you The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed Took bread And when he had given thanks He broke it and said This is my body which is for you Do this in remembrance of me In the same way after supper He took the cup Saying this cup is a new covenant In my blood Do this whenever you drink it In remembrance of me For whoever For whenever you eat this bread And drink this cup You proclaim the Lord's death Until he comes Therefore Whoever eats the bread Or drinks the cup of the Lord In an unworthy manner Will be guilty of sinning Against the body and blood Of the Lord A man ought to examine himself Before he eats of the bread And drinks of the cup For anyone who eats and drinks Without recognising the body of the Lord

Eats and drinks judgment On himself Amen Lord let's pray together our father as we come together as we think of the wonder of the cross we do just praise you that we come together as sinners saved by the grace of God and the grace of God alone your word says to fix her eyes in Jesus the author and perfecter of her faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross and we praise you this morning that we can come before you forgiven not for anything that we've done but the wonder of your grace and mercy that you have worked in our lives we thank you we remember Gethsemane we thank you for Jesus that he chose to go to the cross it was his choice to go and all that he knew that he was going to face all the suffering that he was going to face he chose to go there for our sakes so father we thank you we remember above all as he was on the cross that he said he said it is finished the work is finished the the price has been paid so we thank you for that as we take the bread it's with thanksgiving that you have done so much for us that we are forgiven people we thank you in Jesus name

[36 : 34] Amen thank you thank you thank you thank you

Lord we come before you this morning as unworthy sinners as we've often prayed and we recognize that the only reason we can stand before you is because of the precious blood of Jesus the blood of the the lamb without blemish or spot which was shed on the cross for our sakes as has already been said Jesus chose to go to the cross he his love for us was so great that he was willing to sacrifice everything for our sakes Lord we can never understand that we can never fully comprehend comprehend what it meant for Jesus to give up himself give up his body to be separated from his father on the cross and yet

Lord he did it for us we praise you that by his death and by his resurrection we have peace with God and as we take this wine this morning we do pray that you remember and to appreciate what you have done for us in Jesus name Amen together Lord Thank you Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[42 : 11] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.