

RECAP

Over the last few weeks, we have been going through the Book of Acts. We saw how God's unstoppable kingdom began through Jesus Christ, who sent His disciples to make more disciples all throughout the world. We saw the founding of the church at Pentecost, and how it kept multiplying and growing. We also saw growing opposition to this movement. There were threats from within— Ananias and Sapphira's greed and idolatry threatened to corrupt the new family of God. Last week, we saw how disunity between two groups had the potential to divide the church. We also saw threats from outside. The ruling Jewish majority were against the Christians, and we saw how the Apostles were warned first, and then beaten and flogged in a second encounter. But in spite of these challenges, God's unstoppable kingdom continued to grow.

Today's episode is the climax of this opposition to the early church. We witness the first recorded martyr in church history— a man named Stephen, who was killed because of His faith in Jesus Christ. It is a sad, challenging, and encouraging story; and we know how the story ends. The fact that you and I are here today, gathered in worship, shows that God's unstoppable kingdom did not get stamped out in the first century. But there are still some amazing things that God teaches us through this story.

INTRODUCTION

As I examined Stephen's life in these short few chapters, I realized that he is a good model for us to look at. Last week, we learned that the Apostles had to make the decision to delegate some duties, so as to not neglect the ministries of God's Word and prayer. After Christ, the Apostles were the foundation of the church, and it is understandable that we can look at them sometimes and think, "I can't be like that." While we can learn a lot of things from the Apostles, and we recognize that they were imperfect like us too, it is true that the Apostles had an utterly unique role in church history.

At first glance, Stephen appears to be just as unique. He was performing signs and wonders, spoke boldly to the Jewish leaders, and ended up dying for the cause. That is some serious faith there! I look at those final verses and I get these images of the Braveheart movie where William Wallace is screaming "freedom" with his last breath. It is powerful, emotional stuff, and I think our natural response is, "I could never do that." Yet at the same time, we are filled with admiration. A part of us wants to be like Stephen. Who would not want a eulogy like that? Who would not want a gravestone engraved with that? "Jeremy Tam: Died a glorious death for his greatest passion. Sacrificed his life for the greatest good. A life well-lived." Stephen is famous.

But here is the reality– there is no indication that he was trying to become this Christian hero, that first martyr, and have that unforgettable conclusion to his life. Stephen was not even an apostle. When we look at his life, we see that he was simply a regular, godly, spirit-filled person in the church. So we should be able to identify with him. We should see a man like Stephen and be able to think, “That could be me; I could be him.” That might still sound far-fetched, but as we go through this passage, I think God shows us how it is possible. I noticed three remarkable aspects of Stephen’s life that lead up to the glorious conclusion. Stephen reflected Christ’s life in these three areas, and there are significant implications for us today. Stephen’s final moments defined history, and today’s sermon shows us how he got there; how all of us can get there.

[1] HUMILITY IN POWER

Here is the first point: Stephen reflected Jesus’ humility in power. He was “full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). The people “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10). Stephen was clearly a gifted man. God had given him the ability to do and say amazing things to point others to Jesus. But when you look at these verses, it is easy to forget that when Stephen was introduced to us at the beginning of the chapter, his primary role was to serve tables. It was to do something that the Apostles had to delegate because they had to focus on God’s Word and prayer. Now, if I was a person as gifted and talented as Stephen, I may genuinely be tempted to think, “Why do I have to serve tables? God has given me so many gifts and talents, I’m not sure distributing food to widows is the best use of my time.” But Stephen just steps up to meet the need. There is no indication that he resented it or felt like it was an unworthy task.

In all of life, and particularly in the church family, we can have this constant nagging in our hearts. As we discover our skills and passions, we become so focused on whether we are using them properly. But there are also very real needs and responsibilities. If no one came in to set up the equipment this morning, you would not be able to hear me right now. If no one gave money to support their church family, we would have no place to gather every Sunday. The list goes on. So on the one hand, you have your skills and passions; and on the other, the genuine needs of people around you that need to be met. Sometimes there will be a significant overlap; but sometimes there will not. There will be areas of your life where God calls you to meet a need, regardless of your gifting. I cannot imagine that many people love to scrape brownies off the floor in the kitchen over there, after they have been dropped and smushed into the ground. But I know people who simply see it, get on their knees, and clean

it up. They do not have a particular gift or passion for it; they just do it. I could say the same about packing up the equipment each Sunday. It might not even be physical labour– it might be just seeing someone who is new or alone, and taking the time and energy to begin connecting with them, even if you do not like ‘small talk.’

Stephen had the servant heart of Jesus Christ. He may have heard of how Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, and how he said that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Stephen understood the magnitude of what Jesus did– though He was God, He humbled Himself to become man, in order to pay the penalty of death that we deserve. The question posed to us today is, “Are we willing to serve in the position of humility, or are we simply here to enjoy our gifts in a position of power? Another question you can ask yourself is, “Are there any roles in the church that you would consider to be ‘beneath’ you?” Be honest with yourself. Also, Stephen did not wait on tables because he had to earn God’s favour. He served from a heart that had been touched by God’s humility. Humility in power. How about you?

[2] WISDOM IN COURAGE

The second point is that Stephen reflected Jesus’ wisdom in courage. The Jews accuse Stephen of speaking against the temple and the law: “We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 7:14). The majority of chapter 7 is a long speech that constitutes Stephen’s defence against these charges. Stephen basically summarizes Israel’s history from Abraham through to King Solomon. It is an excellent summary of the Old Testament, and I encourage each of you to go home and read the entire passage tonight.

Basically, in response to the accusation of destroying the temple, Stephen uses Israel’s history to explain how they had constantly misunderstood God’s presence. God does not need to dwell in temples built by people. Scripture says that all of creation is God’s footstool (Isaiah 66:1). But the Jews had this fixation with the physical temple, and had completely rejected the fact that Jesus was the ultimate temple of God.

In response to the accusation about the law, Stephen’s speech comes to a climax as he turns the tables and accuses his accusers: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law... and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53).

Now that is a pretty courageous way to reply to the most powerful people in your culture. But before you go into the office tomorrow or the house party you are going to tonight, and call everyone stiff-necked, uncircumcised, and resisting the Holy Spirit, we need to understand the wisdom in Stephen's courage. This is not an example of someone who arrogantly and ignorantly judges other people. We already know that Stephen is a man filled with the Spirit. He is a sinner saved by grace. Before we try and think about how to imitate Stephen's courage, we need to look at our own hearts.

The only way that Stephen could be filled with the Holy Spirit and also level those accusations against the Jews is because he wrestled through the same things. Stephen himself was a Jew. When he begins his speech, he addressed the crowd respectfully with the term "brothers and fathers." Stephen's forefathers also failed to fulfill the law and misunderstood the temple. They thought they could control God by creating all these specific rules to follow and making sure their lives revolved around the temple. They turned God-centered relationship into self-centered religion. Stephen must have confronted these same issues when he encountered Jesus Christ, the ultimate fulfillment of the law and the living presence of God.

So how does Stephen's accusation apply to us? How have you and I turned God-centered relationship into self-centered religion? Do we think we can appease God just because we come to the 'temple' of Ebenezer school every Sunday? Is there anything you do that makes you feel like you deserve something from God? That is self-centered religion, and Jesus' wisdom applies powerfully to us: Take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the speck out of someone else's (Matt. 7:5). When we have truly faced our sin head-on, wrestled with our own brokenness, and recognized that only Jesus Christ can save us, then we'll have the wisdom and courage to approach the people around us, to confront brokenness in the world in the best possible way.

The Bible says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). When we recognize that our relationship with God is infinitely more important than anything else in life, there is nothing and no one else to fear. As Stephen fearlessly challenged the religious authorities, it is clear that he had great wisdom. His tone may appear harsh, but he was dealing with generations of hardened hearts in God's chosen people. He was following the pattern of the Old Testament prophets, and Jesus Himself, in rebuking the broken religion of the Jews. With another type of person, he may have taken a very different tack. We see it in Jesus' life— how He addressed the Pharisees and teachers of the law, as opposed to the tax collectors and prostitutes. It is wisdom in courage.

What is something that you know that God wants you to do today, but you are fearful of something or someone? Perhaps it is boldly sharing your faith and testimony with someone. Maybe it is telling a family member that you have become a Christian. Maybe it is standing up against some kind of injustice. Has the fear of the Lord set you free from all other fear? Has it given you the wisdom and courage to face every situation in life?

[3] VISION IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The third point is that Stephen reflected Jesus' vision in the face of death. As we reach the climax of the story, it is becoming clear that the Jewish mob was not going to relent. They had already warned and flogged the disciples, and it is at this point that Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). As he was being stoned by the mob, he did exactly what Jesus did in His final moments on the cross— Stephen committed his spirit to God, cried out in a loud voice, and asked God to forgive the men who were literally killing him. Stephen knew exactly what his life was about, and where it was going. In the midst of great suffering, his vision was 'crystal clear.' His life served the singular purpose of glorifying God and making famous the name of Jesus Christ. He knew that there was nothing more valuable in this life than to be unconditionally loved by the God who created him. He knew that he had eternal life and eternal riches waiting for him in the presence of God.

You may have expected this message to be more about persecution. After all, Stephen was the first known martyr. I do want us to think seriously about persecution. I ask every one of you to do some research on persecution this week, and be praying for the persecuted church around the world. In my own reading, I found that 1 in 12 Christians in the world were persecuted in the past year. This is not about getting called names or being unfriended. We are talking about violence and physical harm. I ask you to take Jesus' words seriously when He said to His disciples, "A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). If you are truly following Christ, hard times are inevitable.

But here is the reality: As I said at the beginning, Stephen did not make his life goal to be a martyr. His vision in death shows that his life goal was to see Jesus Christ glorified. His vision started with the Gospel. The only way he could have loved God so much is that he himself had received unconditional love from God. Stephen's vision was so powerful because it was based on the truth that God so loved the world that He gave His only son Jesus, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). This belief transformed Stephen's life. That is why he was filled with the Holy Spirit— with grace,

power, and wisdom. That is why he was faithful in those small things, serving the poor and waiting on tables. That is what led him to speak so boldly to his Jewish brothers. That is why he was still filled with love and grace, even in the face of death from his persecutors. The Gospel changes everything.

So what is your vision in the face of death? We are a young church, but do you realize that we are only guaranteed today, and not tomorrow? Do you realize that at end of this lifetime, your standing before God will be the only thing that matters? Will your vision be of worldly success and human relationships that you have to leave behind? Will your vision be of people whose judgment you fear? Will your vision be rejection of God's love, sealing your fate to eternal death? Or will your vision be the glory of Jesus Christ, welcoming you into eternal life?

CONCLUSION

Serving with humility in power. Sharing God's truth with wisdom in courage. Seeing with Godly vision in the face of death. These things only come from a heart that understands what Jesus did for us on the cross, and that is why we are going to conclude this sermon with a time of Communion. 2,000 years ago, God came to us in human form- in Jesus Christ. He paid the penalty for our sins- death and separation from God- so that we would not have to. The bread, which represents His body broken, and the wine, which represents His blood shed, remind us that God loves us so much that He gave His own life for us. That is why Christ is worth loving, serving, and following at all costs- even physical death. That truth transformed Stephen; it can do the same for us today.