

May 26, 2024
As You Are Going: The Stoning of Stephen
Acts 7:54-8:3
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro – Theme. The last few weeks we have been looking at the biblical account of Stephen in Acts chs. 6-7. And by all appearances, Stephen had everything going for him. He was held in high esteem by his peers because of his character and was given a leadership position as a deacon in the growing early church. But then, as we saw last week, the wheels came off pretty quickly so to speak. Stephen had been telling people about Jesus when he was accused of blasphemy against Moses and against God and he was dragged before the council of high priests, known as the Sanhedrin, where he was asked to defend himself. Which he did by preaching the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts, where he reminded the council of God's gracious dealings with a rebellious Israel.

He ended his message to the religious leaders with this sharp rebuke that we read last week in Acts 7:51-53, "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 as delivered by angels and did not keep it." As I mentioned last week, probably not the smartest thing to say to those who have the power to execute you. But, on the other hand, the Church had prayed for boldness to speak the truth of Christ and Stephen, no doubt, accomplished that. Now, I want to get right to it this morning and continue right where we left off last week as we read about what happened immediately following Stephen's sermon. And in it we will see what God has to say to us today from Stephen's example. If you are able, please stand as I read the Word of God this morning. [Read Acts 7:54-8:3]

Yes, it would appear that Stephen had everything going for him. He was one of the leaders of the early church. He was a person of influence and integrity and he had the respect of his peers. I think we would all like to be described as he was, as "a person full of faith and the Holy Spirit." But now, he's dead. Murdered, cut down in his prime, killed by the very things that made him who he was, his integrity and his character. To us, it seems like a senseless tragedy. I mean, couldn't he have been a little less bold, while still maintaining his character and integrity and saved his life?

Well, that wasn't to be and commentator William Barclay says, "A speech like that could only have one end; Stephen courted death and death came." Luke, the author of Acts, records for us that when the council heard this rebuke they were "enraged and ground their teeth at him." (vs. 54) The word translated "enraged" is from the same root word that is found in Acts 2:37 when, after hearing Peter's sermon, the crowd at Pentecost "were cut to the heart" and asked Peter what must they do to be saved. The root word in the Greek is "katanusso," which means to "prick sharply or pierce; to pain the mind sharply." In Acts 2, the crowd heard the Gospel, were confronted with their sin and the sharp pain of conviction led them to repentance. Here in Acts 7, the council is confronted with their sin and the pain doesn't lead them to repentance, but to rage which is described in the next phrase, "they ground their teeth at him."

This phrase is used throughout the Bible to describe the wicked in their response either towards God and his judgement or toward the righteous, as we see here. It's commonly

misunderstood to describe the pain and anguish of those who suffer the future wrath of God but actually it describes the anger and rage the wicked have toward a Holy God. And we know this to be true from our own experience living in a world that is increasingly becoming more and more anti-God. The viciousness and rage that the ungodly have towards the very mention of Jesus in the public square has increased severely in our culture today. To the point where we, as Christians, are no longer simply tolerated by society, as in days gone by, but we are increasingly thought of as threats to it. May God help us.

Luke next records for us Stephen's vision of what he sees as things are not looking so good from him. [Read vs. 55-56] This must have reminded the council of Jesus' words to them during his trial when Jesus said them, "I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." And now, Stephen is saying that he is seeing the very thing that Jesus said would happen. This was the last straw and they have now heard enough. The next few verses tell us, "...they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him..." (7:57-58)

These were distinguished men of the Jewish Sanhedrin behaving this way. They cried out in agony and covered their ears like little children when they heard the actual words of God, which they regarded as blasphemy. David Guzik in his commentary on this passage says, "It is a dangerous thing to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ. This fulfills what Jesus warned about in John 16:2-3: 'Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.'"

So, they cried out, they drug him out of the city and they stoned him. Stoning was a form of capital punishment that was given by God in the law to Moses in the book of Leviticus. It was a way for the Israelites to understand the seriousness of sin and the importance of removing it from their midst. Although there were many methods of stoning, there were strict guidelines to be followed and it wasn't meant to be taken lightly. One of the methods used is described for us in the Jewish Mishnah, which is a written copy of Jewish oral traditions that had been passed down through the centuries and completed and compiled in the 3rd century AD. The first guideline was the offense had to be witnessed by at least 2 witnesses for a person to be convicted of a crime worthy of this punishment. We know from the beginning of Acts 6, Stephen's accusers instigated some men to bare false witness against him. Once convicted, the person would be led out of the city, symbolizing the purging of sin from the camp. And we read here that Stephen was cast out of the city. Notice the role of the witnesses in the next few steps of the process. Next, the persons hands would be bound and then the first witness would push the person down, face first, into a pit, designated for this sort of thing. This pit had to be at least twice the height of the person and normally had large rocks at the bottom. A designated person would next go down into the pit and check to see if the fall killed the individual. If so, then their duty was fulfilled. If the individual was still alive, they would then turn the individual over on their back and the second witness would throw a large stone onto the person's chest. If this caused death then their duty was fulfilled. But, if the person was still alive, then the rest of those gathered would throw stones until the person was dead. And it was most likely at this point in the process, although we're not told exactly, that Stephen speaks his last words in vs. 59-60, "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ... [and] he cried out with a loud voice,

‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep,” which is a Greek euphemism that means he died.

Now, there are many things that we can learn from Stephen’s example. Boldness in the face of persecution like we saw when Peter and John stood before the religious leaders. Forgiveness of those who persecute you certainly would be a fitting message. But I want to focus on a few things entirely different this morning. First, I want to point out to us, as was the case here with Stephen, that bad things can happen to “good” people. This is a truth of life, especially the Christian life, that we don’t like or want to talk about. In our minds, it shouldn’t be that way. I mean, maybe, if something happens to those we think are really bad we’ll say, “They had that coming.” But we’re always shocked when those whom we perceive as good die unexpectedly, or are diagnosed with cancer, or you fill in the blank. And what do we say then? “They don’t deserve that.” The fact of the matter is, that bad things can, and do, happen to “good” people. According to the theology of some, Stephen should have had everything that he wanted. After all he was a committed Christ follower, a man of prayer who loved Jesus. Stephen should have only experienced the very best that this life had to offer, he should have been healthy, wealthy and wise, lived to a ripe old age and died peacefully in his sleep. There is only one problem with that theology and that way of thinking, it’s wrong. And it only causes feelings of guilt and discouragement in the lives of believers. If Stephen believed this, then what must have been going through his mind as the stones were crushing him to death? “God, didn’t I do all the right things here? Why is this happening to me?”

Now don’t get me wrong, I do believe that becoming a Christian, a serious born again believer, sold out to God and committed to serving him can, and often does, improve a person’s life in a lot of ways. No doubt. But notice that I said often and not always. Godly men and women who have faithfully served God for most of their lives have either experienced suffering at some point in their lives and have come out on the other side or they are even right now in the midst of some kind of suffering, maybe even life long suffering. They have suffered at the hands of others. They have suffered illnesses or maybe even suffered financially. And in many cases it’s of no fault of their own. There is no hidden sin in their lives, there is no lack of faith. They still love God and pray to him but they suffer because. . . are you ready for this? Stuff happens. We live in a fallen, sin affected world. And that’s why God never promises that we won’t go through trouble. In fact, Jesus says the opposite in John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation (troubles, trials, suffering). But take heart; I have overcome the world.” So, the promise is not that we won’t have troubles, but that we, as followers of Jesus, won’t go through them alone. We cling to the promise found in Hebrews 13:5, and it’s echoed throughout the pages of scripture, “For God said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” And this is beautifully displayed for us in our text today. In the midst of his suffering, Stephen saw Jesus, in his case in a very visible way, which led him to praise in the midst of his suffering as well as to pray for those who were causing it.

I wish I could stand up here and wave a magic wand and put some kind of protective shield over you that would keep you from all trouble and illness and heartache, but I can’t. And if I stood up here and promised that all you had to do was believe in God and be faithful and live a holy life and you’d never have any troubles, I would be lying to you. Jesus said in Matthew 5:11, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” Not if others revile and persecute you, but when.

And so, yes, bad things can, and do, happen to “good” people, but thanks be to God, that our text today also shows us that good things can come from bad things. Look with me at the end

of vs. 58, and its one of those, seemingly, bizarre little details of this story, when it says, "...and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul."

Interestingly, there are only two people named in this whole account. We don't know the names of the witnesses who lied about Stephen or the names of the religious leaders who were seated on the council. We know Stephen's name and we know the name of the young man who watched over the garments, which means he gave his approval of, and was even pleased with, those who stoned Stephen, and his name was Saul.

You may or may not be aware this the young man would later come face to face with Jesus and become a Christ follower himself. We'll look at that amazing story when we get to ch. 9. And you might not even know him as Saul but you would know him by the Greek version of his name which was Paul. He wrote the majority of the New Testament and spread the gospel across Asia and into Europe. Saint Augustine, who was a theologian, philosopher and early Church Father once said, "The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen ("Lord, do not hold this sin against them")."

This was the same Paul who wrote Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." I wonder if when Paul was writing those words, he was thinking back to the day that he witnessed what the grace of God could do in the life and death of a young believer named Stephen. I don't believe that God caused the death of Stephen so that Paul would become a Christian and Apostle to the Gentiles, but He certainly used it to accomplish his purposes.

So, to reiterate, bad things happen to "good" people, but because of the sovereignty of God and his character, good things can come from bad things, as we've seen today, and will see in the coming weeks, through the death of Stephen the Church spreads and Saul becomes an apostle.

The next point is just because God can, and does, bring about the good from bad situations, that doesn't always make it easy. Now, I'm not sure if Stephen was married, or if he had kids, or if his parents were still alive, but I'm pretty sure there were those he left behind who missed him. In fact, ch 8:2 tells us that, "Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him." The word "lamentation" here means they mourned deeply and loudly for him because of their deep sense of loss and this was contrary to the Jewish law that prohibited mourning for anyone who had been executed.

Illness, tragedy, death of loved ones, financial hardships all still hurt when we are going through them, but the promise of God is still there, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you." 2 Cor. 4:17-18 tells us, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Finally, we won't always know the end result. Stephen died not knowing what would happen with the church he had served. He knew he had been faithful and he died with the peace of knowing he had done the right thing, even if it had cost him his life. He knew the church was spreading through Jerusalem and having an incredible impact in that area but he probably never envisioned a movement that would affect the whole world. But let's look again to how ch. 8 opens. "And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

This is a turning point in the Book of Acts. Up to this point, the church had been confined to Jerusalem. If the apostles had even given any thought of the last words they heard Jesus speak they hadn't seen it come to pass yet. Remember what Jesus had told them in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses, (martyrs) in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." But up to this point, everything was still contained in Jerusalem. It took Stephen's death to move the church out of their comfort zone and to begin doing what they were supposed to do. In fact, the case can be made, we are here today because of the boldness of people like Stephen who loved Jesus, even to the point of death.

And so, the mission continues. You and I, as followers of Jesus, must continue to take up the mantle and share the good news of Jesus with those who need him. We must not waver in our faith, realizing that we will have troubles in this life and we may even suffer for the sake of Christ. But we are not alone. Our God has promised to never leave us or forsake us. And so, as we are going, let us be a Church on mission.