

Dying Well Acts 7:54-60

We started looking at the end of chapter 7 last time we were together, and in it is recorded the first martyr of a long line of those who would give their lives for the preaching of Jesus and him crucified. The emperors of Rome one after another for the first three hundred years of Christianity tried to stamp out this new religious sect but it quickly became entrenched everywhere. They put these saints to death in the most brutal manner imaginable. Some were taken to the Colosseum and dressed in animal skins and torn apart by wild dogs and other animals. Others were dosed with oil and hung on poles and lit on fire as lamps to Nero's garden parties. But the Roman governors over various districts reported that Christians were often elated to suffer martyrdom for their Lord. They counted it a privilege and a sign of their love that they would be put to death for the cause and glory of Christ. It really challenges us when we complain about any opposition and any trial in our lives as if life was supposed to be easy. We balk at any question that someone might have as far as Christianity because they might have a negative response.

And as we come to this passage as we mentioned last time it would be so easy to be caught up with the overwhelming rage of the crowd that burst on him and forced him out of the city and then with blind rage picked up stones and began to pelt him until there was no life in him. But it really is a contrast. And the most amazing and other-worldly response is not the crowd but it is Stephen. This is what should catch our attention, and it really has taught so many how to die well — die trusting Christ and pointing others to Christ with our last breath before we enter the gates of glory. And what we see of Stephen in verse 55 is that he was full of the Holy Spirit. This was not something that just happened in that moment but something we saw back in chapter six and also throughout this sermon. It is not that he was suddenly zapped with some sort of spiritual adrenaline but he was filled with Christ's gospel and His word, so much so that the Spirit controlled his life. We die well when we are living well in cultivating a heart for Christ, and attitude that says, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." In order to live that way and die magnifying Christ we need to be word-saturated, Spirit filled individuals.

And let's read verse 55 together, "**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.**" The real contrast is the inner peace and assurance Stephen has compared to the uncontrollable rage, hostility and anger of the crowd. I mean how much hatred has to be in your heart to pick up rocks and throw it at someone with the intent of ending his life? Yet Stephen's gaze is not on the crowd, it is not on the injustice of the situation, he is not calling out for fairness, he is not bitter that he served Jesus and this is what he got for it, but it is on Christ. His sight is on the God who Authored this situation and Authored his salvation. He realized as the beloved child of the King that nothing could come into his life that was not ordained by God. And what looked like the triumph of the devil, evil, and fallen humanity was anything but, and we will see in the coming chapters how God used this first martyrdom and how he is still using it to expand his kingdom. Jesus here is standing, not sitting. He has all power and is aware of our plight, and gives the necessary grace to go through whatever he has called us to go

through, even martyrdom itself. If that is true, he will give you the grace to follow, love and make much of him whatever you are going through.

And this passage is not written to make us fearful of the world and what it might do, but to give us courage that our God really is in control of everything that is going on. It is written for our benefit and instruction so that we might not just live well but die well. All our services and every sermon that you ever hear should be preparing you for either the coming of Christ, or the day we meet him in death. Our private devotions at home should be preparing us to die well, looking to Jesus. He really does give for those who are his dying grace to go through that valley as we prepare to meet the author and finisher of our faith — our great and beloved Saviour — Jesus Christ. So I want us to walk through the passage and seek to learn from this man. We can learn from him but he is not the hero of the story but Jesus is. Follow Stephen's example by keeping your gaze on Christ.

1. The testimony of Stephen. V.56-57

There is such a contrast in these verses to what Stephen saw and what the crowds didn't see, between what Stephen tried to communicate and what the crowds refused to hear. But one of the things to always remember, we are certainly not promised a revelation at death that heaven would be opened when we start that exodus through the valley of death. We do have so much more revelation than Stephen ever had, but one of the things to remember is when the heat is on in our lives what we truly believe comes out. So often when people sin against us in certainly less ways than what Stephen is going through, we become angry, we give up on others, we actually harden them in their disposition because we do not give a Christ-centred reaction or response. We complain about the insecurities of life and the little hazards that take away our comfort. But I believe darker days are coming, and we need to really see the testimony of Stephen and prepare ourselves. Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit is not filled with rage but God, with Christ. And even though his sermon is over he keeps the witness going. He keeps pointing to Christ. We think we are so righteous, but look at the response of Stephen, and you have to know that he knows he is going to die.

But look at verse 56, **“And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’”** Notice the first words that Stephen says. There is almost an excitement about it, and he is redirecting the angry mob's attention or trying to — to something or someone else. He is given a supernatural vision. The heavens are opened! There is access — a truth we celebrate every single week. The way is not barred or locked, but praise Jesus he has torn the curtain in two, and for any and all sinners who trust in Christ the heavens are opened ready to welcome Stephen and ready to welcome all who have trusted in Christ! He sees the heavens open literally, but do we see them in our minds eye? Do we see and perceive the glory of what Jesus has accomplished for us? You think Stephen would be crying out for deliverance and rescue as he sees Jesus, but he has been rescued. There is nothing of eternal value that is in jeopardy in the scene. If you are a believer in Christ, in all our sufferings and trials and travails, there is never anything of eternal value that is ever in jeopardy. And if that is true, which it is, then we can use even our death as a means to point others to Christ. Behold Him!

And then he points the crowd to the one he sees in heaven. He sees some manifestation of the Father but he sees the Son in the supreme position of authority at the right hand of the majesty on high. And we mentioned a little of the significance of that last time we were together. This morning I want us to meditate on the title Stephen gives to Jesus. He calls him “the Son of Man.” Do you see that. This is a very obscure designation for Jesus that is seldom used outside of the Gospels. Jesus is called Lord, God, Son of God, Saviour, and many other titles but seldom is this one used. Although, in the gospels it is Jesus’ favourite and most often used designation of himself. Now why does he use it and why does Stephen use it here? Often we say well this stresses his humanity where the term “Son of God” stresses his deity. He is a gift given to humanity. He comes as one of us.

And there is a sense where all of that is true, but the reason Jesus uses the term and the reason why Stephen uses the term is to stress not his humanity but his deity. The language that is used is taken from Daniel 7:13-14, and listen to it and try to discern what this is saying about Jesus, **“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”** Who is the ruler? Who is given dominion and authority over all? And the answer is Jesus. It might seem if we are not given this revelation that man in all his wickedness is in control. But there is one who is mightier than feeble man. There is one who controls an army of angels, and so powerful that he speaks and his will is accomplished. The Son of Man is God.

Now think about it, because what is often ask in times of great evil and great tragedy is: where is God? Well, where is God, where is the Triune God at the martyrdom of Stephen? And the answer in the text is he is right there. Could he stop what is taking place? And the answer is with one word he could. Is he culpable for this atrocity because he had the power to act and didn’t, and the answer is no. He has his reasons for ordaining it and allowing it, but what comes to pass is the Lord’s will. And we will see many of the glorious things that God accomplished through his martyrdom, but so often we do not see and we are not told why certain evil events happen in our world. We have a limitation of what we can discern and understand. Herod orders the execution of all male children two and under. Was God aware of it? And the answer is yes. In fact, he warns Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt. Well, why didn’t he warn the other families? We get ourselves in trouble when we start interpreting the character of God first and foremost from what we observe and then reading it back in the Scriptures. How about 9/11. My God would never plan or ordain that! The greatest evil that has ever been done is the cross, and you get yourself in huge trouble spiritually when you say that God did not plan that. He could have sent the plagues on Nazi Germany but he did not, but he is not any less authoritative. His secretive and mysterious plan will come to pass, and we are to walk by faith.

This is the peace that Stephen walks in. This is his serenity in the whole passage. This is his confidence in a Christ who is all sovereign. This is the Christ who promised in John 10:28-29, **“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and**

no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." This is the aspect we miss. This is Stephen's confidence. They are trying to send him to hell, but nothing they can do can take them out of God the Son's hand. Nothing they can do can snatch them out of God the Father's hand. What breathtaking assurance! What glorious love displayed to sinners like us. Again, Jesus becomes so much larger and more attractive. We start longing for the day we are in his presence. We begin to pray joyously, "Come Lord Jesus!" This Jesus eliminates the fear of death as we celebrate the certainty of our salvation. Not because of the greatness of us. Not because of my tenacity to persevere. Not because of my strength or will power. But because of the sovereignty, and the goodness, and the love of the one who holds me in the palm of his hand. Now if that does not make you want to get up and shout and celebrate and dance I don't know what will!

2. We see the dead response. V.57.

Here they are putting a man to death who cannot die, not realizing that they are dead themselves. They are dead before God. They cannot and will not hear the words of Stephen. When we communicate the Gospel, we communicate the message of God. God speaks through us, and they are dead spiritually, lifeless before him. And so often we look at the world, and maybe some of the sinful passions of worldly individuals and think wouldn't that be great. But don't be duped. Don't be stupefied. That is nothing but deadness and slavery. They are taking Stephen by force but as you look at this whole scene, who is the freest person on in this whole scene? There is such a joy and freedom that is found in being so saturated with who Jesus is that the desires of the flesh have no hold on him. Again, who would you like to be like in this passage? And the real question is: who do you desire to be Lord of your life? It is either Jesus or something or someone else in creation, but in the end whatever or whoever we worship controls what comes out of us. Stephen keeps pointing to Christ.

But here we see, they keep rejecting Christ. Look at verse 57 and try to think of the details here, "**But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.**" I can remember I talked to a person once and they said that it was hard for them to come out to church, to sing the hymns and have any sort of celebratory mood because they were just not a passionate person. And certainly people express themselves different, but what he meant was that he was bored at church, bored with the preaching, bored with the singing. Bored, bored, bored! But every single person on planet earth is passionate. The question is not whether we are passionate, but what are we passionate about? God through the new birth has given us a new passion. We desire to be with God's people, to learn of Jesus, to be conformed to his likeness, to celebrate all that Jesus is for us. True believers are not just going through the motions, but intelligently and passionately worshiping him.

But here is my point, if you are not passionate about Jesus, then you are passionate about something or someone else. And you might be passionate about Jesus in this sense — he stands in the way of what I want. I talked to a young person who was brought up in a Christian home that no longer wanted to come out to church. There is just nothing there for me. No, more accurately, it stood in the way of everything he was passionate about.

And the reason why I say this is that there is so much passion in this verse. Stephen is passionate about Jesus and is controlled by him. Circumstances and people will not alter his passion for his Lord and Saviour. But the crowd is passionate because Jesus stands in the way of everything they desire. This is not some sort of logical and intellectual response to Stephen's message, but impassioned hatred that is out of control in their rejection of Christ. Do you see that? Luke records, "**But they cried out with a loud voice.**" Stephen says, "behold." Look and see! Here is God! Here is the Christ — your only hope! But what do they do and they push Stephen to the outskirts of the city because they could not murder him in the city because that would be sin. They cry out in order to drown out his voice and message. That is why the "but" is there. It is in response to what Stephen is saying and sharing about what he is seeing. They are blind to the whole other-worldly scene. People cannot see these truths because they are spiritually dead, but they also do not want to see these truths. Many individuals would rather break a leg on Sunday morning rather than come to church and hear about Christ.

And that is the other thing they do is not only drown out the message but wilfully and volitionally close their ears to the message. The text says, "**stopped their ears.**" There is no way that they would let themselves hear the message. And again, this is a picture of unbelief, but it also can be a picture of us. Someone can come up to us and give us a loving warning or even a gentle rebuke not to cross certain lines but we think even though others have fallen, we will never fall. We will never forsake the Christ we love. I can handle it, and we stop our ears, we try to change the channel in our minds when those messages keep coming up and give another message. We might sleep during the message or find some other activity on our phones or whatever — anything but listen to the message. And here, they no longer want to hear. They no longer want the message of who Jesus is, and it is amazing because Stephen had just said that you are just like your fathers who rejected the message and killed the prophets or the messengers of God, and here they were in their anger doing that exact thing.

And it is not enough to drown out the message, but they move toward the messenger, and they do this in unison. Whatever their differences as far as Galileans or Pharisees or Sadducees or citizens of Jerusalem or whatever, they are joined in that they rushed toward him to kill him. It is an awful scene of the unrestrained human heart. And you can see this play out today. Believers are commanded to live quiet and peaceable lives so that they can speak the truth in love and carry out the gospel mandate. But the world does not want to live at peace with believers. You do your thing and we will do ours. But there is a hostility that wants to silence the gospel, silence any messenger of Christ - bring shame and ridicule. There are louder and more angry voices than ever before. And it is easy to be fearful but Jesus is still the Son of Man. He still is the director of the universe. And he is still calling men and women to himself in the midst of that darkness. And the world slips further and further into darkness, we have the message of light. We have the message of hope.

It was the same message or the same Lord of that message that sustained Stephen and gave him a peace that passes understanding because it is stayed on Christ. The question we have to ask ourselves is where do we want to be found? What Lord are we looking for? Have we even made it a goal, a priority in our lives to cultivate such a relationship with Jesus — the Son of Man — that the fear of death has been

eclipsed with the joy that we will be with him? We are either controlled by that peace or we are controlled by fear. People are fearing so much of what is to come and often we spread that fear. Did you hear what the government is doing now? Did you hear about of the Paw Patrol pups and the colours they are wearing. Fear the Pup! Perfect love for Christ casts out fear. Here is hope and peace to live well and die well. It is found in the Lord of our salvation. It is found in Jesus!