

Dying Well Pt.3
Acts 7:56-60

Well, we come to the end of this chapter where we have seen Stephen full of the Holy Spirit preach forth the gospel, and in particular the guilt of the Jews in rejecting Jesus Christ. And last time we were together we saw the Jews and their rage which was out of control, and the serene disposition of Stephen as he was forced out of the city to be stoned. The contrast could not be more apparent. And in their anger, they missed what Stephen saw, and that is the Son of Man standing at the right hand of the Father. Stephen not only saw His Saviour but he saw his Lord. He saw the one who truly was in control even though all of life seemed out of control. And it is incredible scene where we are reminded that God is not only aware of our struggles and suffering but is present and has planned them, and has reason and purpose in them.

And in verse 58 someone enters the narrative that is going to play a major part in this early history of the church, in fact he will become the dominant figure from chapter 13 and on. Look at verse 58, **“Then 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.”** Notice they cast Stephen out of the city. This was forced and evil. And notice the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man Saul. No one could be sentence to death without witnesses to corroborate the facts, and these were certainly false witnesses. There was no real court proceeding or even sentence handed down, but they wanted to give the appearance of godliness. But almost like an incidental thought we read the witnesses laid their garments down at the feet of Saul. They would be the first to cast stones at the condemned. Here we see that Saul — a well educated man gave his approval with all that is taking place. In fact in the beginning of the next chapter we read, **“And Saul approved of his execution.”** He deemed him worthy of death, and this young man became the leading personality in the early persecution of believers. His whole passion was to wipe out faith in Jesus by force. And we all know he became the greatest propagator of the gospel of Jesus Christ that this world has ever known. It is incredible to see the grace of God to change the foulest of hearts. He not only changed Saul’s heart but if you are a believer he changed your heart.

And now this morning the focus is on Stephen in the last two verses and his last two statements he makes in his earthly life, and both of them are filled with so much conviction and certainty in Christ as Lord. And one of the things these martyrs teach us is how to die well. It is one thing to live well, but we want to die well with that confidence in Christ and Christ alone. If you knew nothing of Christianity and you walked into a service and heard the Scripture reading and heard the singing and preaching you probably would be shocked that we sing about a bloody death of someone who lived two thousand years ago as our only hope. But above that, you would probably be shocked that many of our songs rejoice that we are on that pathway to exiting this life. We talk about death and we stare death in the face. And there is a sense that from the moment we come to Christ to the moment we die is all a preparation for our death — that we might leave this existence trusting Jesus. **“For to**

me to live is Christ but to die is gain.” Have you ever thought about those words — really pondered the significance and meaning of those words?

You see our hope is not to have all of our dreams and aspirations come to pass, or have a great life now. Nothing lasts in this life. Nothing! It gives the message that we were not made for this world and there is a better world and existence to come. Every shattered dream and pain and sorrow is a reminder of what is to come and should cause us to long for eternity. But also every joy and celebration and jubilation we have in this world is a reminder that there is greater joy that far exceeds the many joys and blessings that God gives us. And the assurance of that day is not our goodness but focusing on our Lord. And that is really the key to living well and dying well. It is seeing all that Jesus is for a wretched sinner like me. Stephen saw the hero of his faith, and kept his eyes on his and he died well.

And in a day and age where so many are so fearful of death. Who will care for my family? Or I will never be able to go here or experience that, Stephen stared death in the face with an expectation of what is to come. How about you? Certainly death is still our enemy in that it is part and parcel of the curse but Christ has taken the sting away because of his great love and salvation he has purchased for us. We learn to trust in Christ from these examples of believers who died well. We learn to die with that great joy of what is to come, and then we become the very testimonies to others to set their eyes on the Author and Finisher of our faith Jesus. So I want us this morning to ponder the faithful last words of Stephen here in this text.

1. We see where our hope lies. V.59.

Now both of these statements echo statements that Jesus made on the cross. And think of it because his life is being taken away violently and unjustly, but there is no animosity. He is not overwhelmed with fear or anxiety. He is not consumed with anger or regret, but being filled with the Spirit and keeping his eyes on Jesus he never was more like Jesus than here at his point of death. He is truly changed by looking and behold Christ from one degree of glory to another. And his confidence is in Christ his Lord and Saviour. And it is amazing because he is not asking to be saved from this hour. There is no fear in Stephen at all. Jesus is really this great and not even the crowd pelting him with rocks can separate him from Christ. All it can do is bring him right into the presence of His Lord. For to me to live is Christ to die is gain!

So look at what he says here and marvel at these words, because Jesus can create this confidence and this joy as we look to him. He can truly cast away the fear of death, and if the fear of death is cast away just think how we would use our time and everything to make much of him, just think how life would be different. Life would be about him. The prospect of death would not be dread but expectation, as you see here. Look again at this verse, **“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”** Again, the contrast could not be greater. They in their anger and rage are pelting him with stones. The pain and agony as the thud of the stone finds its mark. The welts and the open wounds would be evident. But here is a man who is at peace with what is happening because he is found ultimate peace before God through Jesus Christ. This is momentary affliction but what is about to come is eternal weight.

And as we said, these words of Stephen here mirror the words of the Lord Jesus on the cross. Listen to Luke 23:46, **“Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said,**

‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.” Now it is interesting that Luke is the only one that records this cry of Jesus from the cross. And no doubt as he records it he is mindful of another cry that echoes the same trust in God and that is Stephen’s right here. And it is incredible because Stephen knows he is going to die, and here is his confidence. It is in God. It is the same confidence that Jesus has in God. Jesus is the greatest example of walking by faith, and here is Jesus following that example. There is such a trust and even delight in God. He commits his inner person to God. He knows to be absent from the body is to be present at home with the Lord. And think through the things that might race through your mind at this time. Stephen’s gaze is not on what he has accomplish but what Christ has accomplished, and therefore there is a sure expectation of what lies behind this life. Think of what occupied his mind and the assurance and confidence that he could commit his life to the one who cares and cannot and will not do anything wrong. Think of his confidence in the truth of 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, **“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.”** He was about to come into the presence of Christ.

And there is likeness in these statements made by Jesus and Stephen but there also is a difference. Jesus says, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** Stephen says, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** And this is so incredible because it is a testimony to the personhood of Jesus. He is One with the Father and he is also very God. He is the sovereign over the destiny and welfare of our souls. And this is a forgotten grace that is open to many but often they do not take it, and that is to point others, even this maddened crowd to our hope and confidence in life and death — Jesus our Lord. And many might not do it at the point of death when they have the greatest opportunity to be witnesses of Jesus because life is the here is now is not about Christ. It is about us and our aspirations or our personal happiness the way we define it. But **“For to me to live is Christ,”** and I am living and celebrating and pointing and serving and seeking to helps others make much of him, then in death it will be to help others once again to see him as my all and my confidence.

And here is the thing and the spiritual principle: what we have put in throughout our life will come out at the point of death. It naturally or supernaturally spills out. If it is about us, then that comes out. It is all about my family or career or accomplishments then that comes out. But if our joy and confidence and our aim is to help others see what I am growing to see then I will want to use death as a bull-horn to call others to see my glorious Jesus who will receive my spirit through his merits. We die well because we have lived that life of faith and trust looking unto Jesus. So if you want to die well, are you living well? What are you consumed with? What are you putting in? Is there anything that would help us see Jesus? Are we even consumed with wanting others to see him? In order to die well we have to see and growing in seeing him today.

2. The last words of Stephen. V. 60.

Wow! Last words are not wasted. We use them wisely. When Jesus hung on the cross as our sin bearer, it took all his strength to utter the words that he said. He chose

them carefully. We take words so lightly, and you can see that in two ways. One is that we say things that we ought not to say. It is so natural to talk so often we forget we are representatives of another. Or, we do not say what we ought to say. I wish I would have told them how much I loved them before they left. If I could go back this is what I would say. But let me paint another scenario for you. If you had just moments before death and you knew it; you knew this was the final curtain on this life before you entered into the presence of Jesus and many were gathered around your bedside what would you say to them? Would you express your love for all those who were in your presence? Would you thank God and encourage them to look to Christ? I hope we would. I hope we would be so Christ-centred that he would be the joy we would want to share.

But let me paint another scenario because life in a fallen world is often messy. What if around your bed were gathered all the people in your life who had done you the worse harm, and they were delighted that you were leaving this world and they would see you no more. They had and have hatred toward you and despise you. They might be even mocking you and delighting in your death. They might even say the judgment of God has come upon you. You have moments before you enter the presence of God. What would your heart be consumed with? What would be going through your mind? Because as you look at this whole scene, there are no friends or loved ones of Stephen here. There are none weeping for him but those who take on themselves the role of judge in God's stead to execute him in passionate rage and anger. They think in their anger that they are actually doing the will of God.

Last words carry weight. We remember them. But knowing all the circumstances around what is happening here, these words portray such a godliness, such a care for God's glory and a welfare even of his enemies. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who abuse us, but we are blown away at the magnitude of how Stephen applied this in his life. He is so aware of how Jesus died. He is so aware that Jesus didn't just say certain words but he meant what he said. There is no hypocrisy in Jesus and there is none here. Look at the last words of Stephen and realize what is going on around him, **"And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."** Why did he fall to his knees? Did he want to take a posture of prayer or was it that one of the stones found its mark and brought him to the point of death? And I think it was the latter. Now he cries out quickly because he realizes this is it. This is his last request. This is what is occupying his heart and his thoughts.

And again, it is emblematic of the prayer of Jesus from the cross. Listen to what Luke records in Luke 23:34, **"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments."** Now what does Jesus mean when he says "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."? It certainly does not mean that they do not know they are putting Jesus to death. They have called out for him to be crucified. They knew the end. They knew exactly what they were doing, but they could not possibly know the worth of the one they were putting to death, the gravity of Jesus and the inexhaustible worth and even innocence of Jesus. There had never been anyone more innocent and holy and righteous than Jesus, so it is the greatest crime that sinful humanity has ever done.

So think of it as it now said by Stephen. They knew they were putting Stephen to death, and although Stephen is innocent of the crimes that they have charged him of, he still is a sinner. But think of his cry, "Do not hold this sin against them." What is the sin? And we would say putting to death an innocent man, but it is more than that, and you will see that with the rise of persecution that begins in verse 1 of the next chapter. By putting to death Stephen they are not rejecting Stephen chiefly but reject the Lord of Stephen. The hatred is in who he proclaims and even who he points to in death. My only hope is in Jesus Christ and his righteousness. This is what they hate. It is Jesus. And they cannot imagine the gravity and worth of Christ. They cannot imagine the gravity and demerit and enormity of their sin in rejecting him. None of us knows or can fathom the true worth of Christ. We can grow in knowing it but cannot truly fathom the immensity of Jesus, therefore none of can really fathom the lowest depths what are sin deserves.

The other thing that is striking is when you realize what he is praying, and think of how we pray for those who do us harm, because when he prays this prayer, he does not say, "Lord, I forgive them of this great evil they have done me." Stephen certainly is in a posture of forgiveness but his opponents are not. And he realizes although this is done against him, all sin is first and foremost done against God. It is a rejection of Jesus. That is what makes sin so sinful. It is not just a misdeed against another sinner but rebellion against the worth and excellency of God.

But what is he asking God to do? Is he asking God to somehow overlook this sin? And the answer is no. He has just preached the gospel. He has just made known to them the hope of Christ. He has just shown them their guilt and need to repent and not trust in their own righteousness but the righteousness of another. He knows for God to forgive them, he would have to work in their hearts to remove the heart of stone, and give them a heart of flesh, so that they would trust in Christ for full and free salvation. He is asking God to do the same work of grace that was done to him as an undeserving sinner in their lives. It is a compassionate and gospel-infused prayer that will ultimately lead to Jesus being magnified and glorified.

And with these words we read that he fell asleep. I love the way it describes death. The falling asleep and the waking into another realm. It is so comforting. But think how God used this prayer because again, just as a passing note we read in verse 58 about young Saul. He approved of this evil - this death. Yet our Lord had mercy on him. He changed his heart. He can really change the foulest heart. And how Paul must have come back to this sermon of Stephen with tears and heartache but in joy and humble gratitude that God answered Stephen's prayer in his life. And our Lord continues to answer this prayer by bringing us to Christ through the ministry of Paul and the words of Scripture. God used the apostle Paul to proclaim Christ, and that proclamation continues on to unworthy sinners. This certainly was not lost. This was certainly not the gates of hell destroying the church but the exact opposite.

And isn't it amazing that one of the greatest witnesses that we can have is what all our Christian lives are preparing us for, and that is we will see. It is preparing that we would die well. It is preparing us to take away the fear of death to expectation and joy. And in that time God gives us a wonderful opportunity to speak forth our hope in death is Jesus and his righteousness, because he has been our hope in life. So here is the question: are you preparing yourself to die well? None of us know when that will be,

but it will come. May all of keep looking to Jesus who is not only the Author of our salvation but the Finisher. The finish line will come. It is closer than ever before. Let us run well, let us finish well.