
The Stephens Witness Pt 2

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 23 August

Matthew 10: 16-22 Acts 7:51, 8:1



Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as we look to your word, may we see you, and as we see so may we live, amen.

Flowing from my opening prayer, and foundational to the teaching of the gospel, if it is to impact our life and witness, is the call to be like Jesus in our attitudes and actions. Now that is certainly a lot less challenging when things are going well and folk are being nice to us.

It's a lot more challenging when we are on the receiving end of someone's displeasure or worse, their wrath. It's especially hard to be on the wrong side of someone because we have done something that we believe is for the good of the one who is angry at us.

Parents know about that. We set a boundary. We say, "no desert till you've eaten your dinner." Or "time to go to bed." Or when they get a little older. "You have to be home by x or Y time." Our beloved wee angel says, thanks mum. Thanks dad. I really appreciate your care for me. I know I need boundaries for my safety.

Not likely. That may well be the point where we are informed we are then worst parents in the world, and everyone else's parents let them do whatever they want to do. It's simply a fact of life that people will disagree with us. Sometimes they will try to hurt us. Even when we are trying to help them.

Stephen thus far has shown himself to be a respected, capable, Spirit filled, servant hearted follower of Jesus. He is also going to be the first person in the post Pentecost church to give his life for the sake of the gospel.

Stephens death will quite literally prove to be for the sake of the gospel, because following Stephen's execution, the floodgates of persecution will open. Saul in particular will unleash a wave of hate against the church.

As we see what happens in our reading today, it might seem like the enemy is finally winning. But God will use the persecution as a prod to move the gospel beyond the borders of Jerusalem.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the Earth," Jesus said. The church is currently camped, and somewhat comfortable, in Jerusalem. About now this is going to change.

We have already seen that those who argued with Stephen could not withstand his Holy Spirit given wisdom. Then there was his defence against the false witnesses who were accusing him of speaking against the law, the customs of Moses, and the Temple. I think we could say his defence was somewhat glorious.

Vs 15, where we left off last week. "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." Stephen was manifesting something of the same glory that had been seen on Moses face when he met with God and was receiving the Law.

It was indeed a glorious defence in regards Stephen's integrity, authority, and most of all his connection with the one who fulfilled the Law of Moses, Jesus. The high priest obviously didn't join the dots. As chapter 7 begins he asks the question. Vs 1, are these charges, are these things true?

There follows over the next 49 vs, and we haven't got time to look into Stephens answer except to say he tells of the patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. He recounts Moses and the Exodus. The giving of the law. , Entering the promised land and the building of the temple.

But also and importantly, "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands". We pick up the text in vs 51. 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.”

Stephen, manifesting something of the glory of God has turned the tables on his accusers, and accuses them. They are working against God and against the law. Vs 54, “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.”

This is not just anger. This is uncontrollable rage. Teeth grinding, snarling, animal like rage. The council were already looking for an excuse to kill Stephen before he opened his mouth. When he did, he effectively turns the tables on them, puts them on trial, and finds them guilty. They are enraged to the point they sound more like snarling dogs than people.

What Stephen says next will push them even further.

Vs 55-56 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. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” This is a Spirit empowered moment of revelation. Stephen sees Jesus in his glory at the right hand of God the Father.

As I was preparing this message it dawned on me that Stephen was the first one to see Jesus in his ascended glory. John’s vision of the glorified Jesus in the heaven’s, as recorded in the book Revelation does not happen till several decades later.

How fitting then that Stephen the first martyr, is the first to see Jesus in this way. And as many have noted. It looks like Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen home. This is the only account we get in the scriptures of Jesus standing, as compared sitting, at the right hand of God.

“I see heaven open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Their rage becomes uncontrollable. They cover their ears, lest they hear any more of what they consider to be blasphemy. With a shout they rush at Stephen. A couple details of what follows shows that Stephen meets his end as the result of a brutal mob execution.

Let me explain. Generally when someone is executed for a crime things are done in a certain way. While any kind of execution is hard to describe as humane, there is some semblance of humanity about it.

Take the lethal injection for example. It's usually two injections. Before the life stopping injection is administered, a first injection of sedative is given. If it's only one injection, it has so much sedative in it you are unconscious before the inevitable result of the exercise happens.

At a Jewish stoning there was a process that was designed to minimise suffering, in something of the same way we try to do in our day.

The person would often be dead before the first stone hit them. They would stand on the edge of a ledge with about a 2-3 mtr drop. One of the witnesses, and remember no one could be condemned without the evidence of two or three witnesses, the first witness would push them at their hips, and falling backwards head first that would usually be it.

If they were not dead the second witness would drop a very large stone onto their chest and heart area. If that did not kill them outright the crowd would finish the job, raining rocks and stones on them from the ledge.

As Stephen was being stoned he was praying. He then fell to his knees. You only fall to your knees from a standing position. Your not standing if the stoning protocol has been followed. The details show this execution was nothing less than rage fuelled mob hate crime.

Here is a man of faith, wisdom, grace, and power. A man of good reputation and full of the Spirit. A man who knows the word and how to apply it. Just the sort of bloke you would hope would have a long and profitable ministry. It was not long. But it was profitable. For him and for the cause of the Gospel.

At his moment of greatest need Jesus came with a special revelation of himself, and a sign that Stephen was about to get a great welcome from Jesus. Stephen had honoured Jesus with his words. Now as Jesus stood to receive the first martyr of the post Pentecost church, Jesus was honouring him. Or to say it another way. As Stephen made a stand for Jesus on earth. Jesus made a stand for Stephen in heaven. Isn't that a wonderful thought? Gives you goose bumps.

And then there is the wonderful witness of Stephen even at the hands of this outraged mob. Stephen lived like Jesus. And Stephen died like Jesus in regard to his attitude to those who were killing him.

Jesus on the cross, “Father, into your hand I commit my Spirit.” Stephen as the stones rained down, “Lord Jesus receive my spirit.” Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Stephen, as he knelt down and cried in a loud voice “Lord do not hold this sin against them.”

The passage ends, 8:1 and Saul approved of his execution. From Paul’s later writings is clear that he was profoundly shaped by what he witnessed that day. But not in the short term, and until he too had had a revelation of the glorified Jesus on the Damascus rd. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me. Jesus identification, and union with suffering believers is made clear in Jesus question to Saul.

In the immediate aftermath of Stephens killing a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and Saul was at the pointy end of it. But again, Stephens death did effect Saul as Stephen showed the same grace in his death as Jesus had in his. “Receive my Spirit”. “Do not hold this sin against them.”

Remember one of the criminals crucified along with Jesus. He started by mocking and then before the end said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. Truly, I tell you said Jesus, this day you will be with me in paradise.” That guilty man worthy of death found salvation that day as he turned to Jesus in faith and trust.

Back to our opening thought. It’s one thing to live for Jesus when things are easy. Much harder when we are misunderstood, even attacked for doing what we believe is right. Where do we find encouragement?

Remember the words of Jesus. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are you and people insult you persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

Not “blessed are you when you are persecuted for doing dumb things.” “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.” Blessed are you when the Gospel shapes your life, even when it’s tough.

Stephen was not alone as he faced his trial and God would use the very circumstances of Stephens death and Saul’s subsequent attack on the church to advance the kingdom. God is sovereign. I will build my church and the very gates of hell will not prevail, or stand up against it.

Threats. Bodily harm. Internal compromise. Disunity and Distraction. And now the first martyr is killed and the church is ravaged.

We see that every attack of the enemy fails when we are close to him who calls us. And it seems, whether we realise it or not, that we are never closer than when times are difficult.

“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 “behold I see heaven opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of God.”

- It's an invitation to see Jesus for who he is, the Son of God our saviour.
- It's an invitation to see Jesus where he is. Ascended and glorified, now at the right hand of God the Father, far above all rule and authority.

It might seem like the prince of this world, even treated by some as the god of this world is in control. But not a bit of it. God is sovereign, and as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes, and the word of God enlightens our minds and transforms our hearts we see things as they really are.

Stephen saw, and it kept him faithful. Even as he died his faith carried him through, and he died with hope and grace endeavouring the best he could to be just like Jesus. And then he fell asleep. What a lovely way to describe the transition from this life into the very presence of Jesus.

What a witness Stephen gives us. Though he was unaware of it at the time, it was a witness that would profoundly shape that young man Saul, who at this stage is in full agreement with Stephen's execution.

The sovereign God will capture that young man but first Saul's very attack on the people of God will advance to progress of the Gospel.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, keep us faithful to you whatever the cost. May our witness be impactful as we seek to make the Gospel known, amen.