

Three Surprising Truths We Learn from the Story of Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60)

You know, I've discovered that much of my frustration, anger and stress isn't caused by what happens to me; but instead by what I expect to happen – what I thought *should* happen; what other people should do; how long a task should take; how other drivers should drive. I expect life to be a certain way and when it's not, I get upset. I'm more upset by my unrealistic expectations of what I think *should* happen than I am by what actually happens. This morning as we continue making our way through *The Acts of the Apostles* and the history of the early church, I want to look at the amazing story of Stephen and at three surprising truths we learn from it. What struck me as I read this story is how different Stephen's experience was from what many Christians expect from God today. I find that a lot of people are irritated with God because their life isn't turning out the way they expect someone who is being blessed by God should. They think, "If God really loved me, if God was really with me, *this* (and you can fill in the blank, more money, better health, less problems with my kids or with my parents) would be happening." Yet our expectations of God are shaped more by our culture than by the scriptures. The story of Stephen gives us a healthy dose of reality and teaches us that (1) God's blessing doesn't guarantee success and popularity, (2) Just because you're right doesn't mean people will believe you, and (3) your last day will be your best day. These truths aren't surprising to people from other cultures but they are certainly different than what our culture tells us.

Surprising truth number 1: God's blessing doesn't guarantee success and popularity. *"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people."* (Acts 6:8) Last week, we met Stephen, one of seven men the congregation in Jerusalem chose to assist the apostles in the care of the church. In vs. 8, Stephen takes the gospel to the Hellenistic Hebrews of Jerusalem and Luke emphasizes the extent that God blesses Stephen. He is full of grace and power, the first non-apostle to perform great miracles, and demonstrating that even those who weren't part of the original disciples can be greatly used because Jesus lives in them just like He lives in the apostles. In Stephen, we see the beginning of a pattern in Acts that continues to the present day, the need to multiply. Disciple-making is teaching others to follow Jesus so that they can in turn teach others; and throughout Acts we'll see one generation of disciples creating another generation of disciples who do what they do. For the church to advance; power must be shared and new leaders must be raised up. However, even though Stephen is being greatly used by God, God's blessing on his ministry doesn't translate into success or popularity for Stephen personally – just the opposite in fact. *"But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, {including} both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel."* (Acts 6:9-15) It's easy to think that if we could do miracles, people would have to believe. We forget they didn't believe when Jesus did miracles and neither do they believe when Jesus does them through Stephen. According to the Jewish Talmud, there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at this time, probably because there were so many Jews from all over the world living there; and each had their own synagogue where their language was spoken and their culture expressed. Stephen himself was a Hellenistic Jew – a Greek speaking Jew, having grown up outside of Israel - and so naturally, he preaches the gospel to Hellenistic Jews; and he begins to get some pushback from some members of the Hellenistic synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen; which means that it was composed of Jews who had once been slaves of Rome but who had been freed; specifically Jews from Northern Africa and the Roman provinces of Cyrene and Alexandria; as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia in present day Turkey. By the way, the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus where Paul was born and not surprisingly, this was Paul's synagogue which is why we meet him for the first time in this chapter. In spite of the wonders God performs through Stephen and the wisdom God gives Stephen – which these men are clearly unable

to cope with – rather than becoming Christians or at least admitting they can't answer Stephen's arguments about why Jesus must be the promised Messiah, these Hellenistic Jews begin to lie about Stephen. Blasphemy was a capital offense and they claim that Stephen has blasphemed both Moses and God. An angry mob forms and they drag Stephen before the Council - the Supreme Court of Israel; the same guys who crucified Jesus and flogged the apostles – and charge Stephen with blaspheming the Law and the temple – which was very clever because speaking against the temple was the one crime the Jews could legally execute someone for without going to the Romans for permission. When these guys can't defeat Stephen in a legitimate debate, they form a lynch mob to get rid of him once and for all.

This is a significant development in the history of the church. Up to this point, the only enemies the church has have been the Council, the ruling religious party of the Sadducees. Now, however, the Sadducees gain a powerful ally; the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem begin to turn against the church. Why? We can see the reason in the false accusations against Stephen. *"This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."* Stephen is accused of speaking against all that is precious to Jews; the temple, the Law, the customs; all that made a Jew a Jew. Now as we'll see in Stephen's defense of himself, he didn't blaspheme Moses or the Law and he didn't say that Jesus was going to destroy the temple. What Stephen did was to preach about the implications of the gospel on Judaism which infuriated these guys. At this time, the Jews believed that God was only the God of Israel. They alone were God's people; the only people God had spoken to and have given access to Himself through the priesthood and the sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. God would welcome non-Jews from other nations, only if they converted to Judaism. But if Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to God but through Him and by faith in His finished work on the cross, then it is no longer only Jews who can be saved but anyone from any nation who puts their trust in Jesus. If Jesus is the way to God, then the sacrifices in the temple and the temple itself and the law of Moses have become obsolete; because people are saved by faith in Christ and not by obedience to the Law and its ceremonies and rituals. Stephen is the first Christian to really get this and to preach it. Up to this point, the apostles have preached only the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and called people to repent and believe in Him. The implications of the gospel on Judaism haven't been understood until now; which is why Stephen's defense which follows is the longest sermon in Acts because it is so foundational to what happens in the rest of the book. Up to this point, Christianity was only seen as a Jewish sect. The Christians were good Jews and worshiped together in the temple. They just happened to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. That's why the general population of Jerusalem held them in high regard. But Stephen begins to preach the implications of the gospel on Judaism itself and the Christians suddenly become a threat to all the Jews treasure and hold dear and find their security in: their unique place before God because they are Jewish. That's why even though Stephen is mightily used by God, God's blessing of his life and ministry doesn't translate into success and popularity; just the opposite. He is a threat and when you're a threat, people don't care that you can do miracles or have better arguments – if anything, that just makes you more dangerous.

Here's why this is an important lesson for us. For a long time, I believed that if God was really blessing me, then I would be successful at whatever I did. People will like me and I would have everything I wanted. For me, the blessing of God looked a lot like the American Dream and I brought that expectation with me into ministry; with dreams of fame and recognition. I'm so grateful that God didn't give me what I wanted in those early years because much of what I wanted was wrong. If Stephen had evaluated his ministry in terms of results, he would have been discouraged. Nobody was added to the church. In fact, one is subtracted. Yet Luke tells us that God richly blessed Stephen and we'll see how significant Stephen is to the plan of God in the coming weeks. The first surprising truth that we learn from the story of Stephen is that God's blessing often looks different than what we expect. We may be blind to the ways God is faithfully working in our life because we expected something different; maybe more money or friends or less problems and trials. Even though few of us buy into Prosperity Theology and the idea that if you're really trusting God, you will be healthy and wealthy; we can still be closet Prosperity Theologians when we define God's blessing as getting everything we want and thinking that God has abandoned us when we don't. The example of Stephen is a great reminder that God can use you in a mighty way and yet you'll suffer for it – just like Jesus.

The second surprising truth from the story of Stephen is similar to the first; just because you're right doesn't mean that people will believe you. Stephen is dragged before the Council by the members of the Synagogue of the Freedman and falsely accused of blaspheming God, Moses, the Law and the temple. He couldn't have faced more serious charges in Israel. His life is on the line. The high priest asks Stephen, "Are these things so?" Chapter 7 is a record of Stephen's defense but he doesn't defend himself but faith in Christ as the only way to God. Stephen gives an overview of Old Testament history – something these men were very familiar with – and in doing so, he makes three major points. First, God has never been confined to the borders of Israel. The Jews believe they are the only nation with access to God; that God is the only God but He is a local God and to worship Him, you have to come to Israel. But Stephen reminds them of three of the great heroes of the Jewish faith; Abraham, Joseph and Moses; each of whom God spoke to outside of Israel; Abraham in Mesopotamia, Joseph in Egypt and Moses in Sinai. None had to come to Israel to hear from God because He is everywhere in the world. Acts 7:2 *"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."* Acts 7:9; *"The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. {Yet} God was with him."* Acts 7:30: *"After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO Moses IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH."* Plus Stephen reminds the Council that God was with the people Israel before they entered the land of Israel. Acts 7:44: *"Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed {him} to make it according to the pattern which he had seen."* The tabernacle was a tent which housed the ark and the altar and where the glory of God regularly appeared during the 40 years Israel was wandering around in the Sinai Peninsula. Old Testament history clearly shows God actively at work in other places besides Israel and that brings us to Stephen's second point. Because God is everywhere, He isn't confined to the temple in Jerusalem. Stephen quotes from Isaiah, *"Heaven is My throne and Earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?" says the Lord, or what place is there for My repose? Was it not my hand which made all these things?"* (Acts 7:49-50) God is not confined to Israel or to its temple; and so the gospel is not blasphemy for claiming the temple is unnecessary for access to God; but is consistent with what the Old Testament teaches. Third, in their spiritual pride, the Jews forget that Old Testament history is really the story of Israel rejecting the messengers God sent to her. Instead of taking pride in their history, the Jews should be humbled by it. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery and Israel rejected Moses when he first attempted to lead them. *"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush."* (Acts 7:35) Acts 7:51-53 *"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and {yet} did not keep it."* The gospel isn't good news until we believe the bad news and why we need a Savior and why we can't save ourselves. That's why just as John the Baptist and Jesus warned Israel about depending on their religious heritage for their relationship with God, Stephen now challenges the spiritual pride and entitlement of the first century Jews. They believed they had a relationship with God because of the priesthood, the temple, the Law and their history, yet Stephen asks what prophet of God haven't you killed and what law of God haven't you broken? Your confidence in your religion is misplaced. The problem isn't with Judaism, the problem is with you. That's why you need a Savior. If people practiced their religion perfectly, perhaps religion could save them; but nobody lives consistently with what we say we believe. That's why no one will be saved by what they do but only by faith in what Christ has done.

Chair: People booing speaker: Stephen - filled with the Spirit; his face shining like an angel, with words and a Spirit so powerful and compelling that none of his enemies can refute or answer -preaches one of the greatest sermons in history. I know I'll never preach a sermon like this. But notice how the Council reacts. Acts 7:54; *"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they {began} gnashing their teeth at him."* The men on the Council are absolutely furious. They become primal, like a pack of angry wolves, baring their teeth at Stephen. Why would Stephen's sermon cause such an intense reaction? He is attacking their very identity as Jews, the thing that gives them their security, their religious pride. Israel is a tiny player on the world stage at this time, occupied by the Romans, a third world client state. Yet the Jews look down their nose on every non-Jew. *"We're clean and you're not. We know God and you worship idols. We are God's chosen and you are cursed."* But Stephen sees the implications of the gospel clearer than any of the other first Christians. If we are saved by what Christ has done and not by anything we do, then all religion is dangerous because it gives people a false sense of security and blinds them to their need for a Savior. God is the God of everyone, not just the Jews; and everyone is saved the

same way; through faith in Jesus whether Jew or Gentile. And the religious folks – not surprisingly – are infuriated. The Jews will be Christianity’s most violent persecutors for the remainder of the book of Acts because the Christians believe that anyone can have a relationship with God through Christ; not just Jews; because Christians refuse to insist that people must become Jews before they can know God. We learn in the following verses that Saul who was later known as Paul was at the synagogue and the ensuing trial before the Council that day; and he also was infuriated. Stephen’s sermon provoked Saul to such an extent that he became a violent opponent of the faith because he believed the Christians were leading the Jews astray. It’s interesting that years later, when we read Paul’s first recorded sermon as a Christian, it sounds a lot like Stephen’s.

What’s the lesson for us? Stephen could not have been more powerful, articulate, logical or correct in what he said that day; yet everyone who heard him not only rejected what he said but wanted Stephen dead. Just because you’re right doesn’t mean that people will believe you. People believe what they want to believe; what the people around them believe; what they think is in their best interests to believe. “Don’t confuse me with facts, I know what I believe.” Don’t judge how well you explained the gospel by how somebody reacts. Our job is just to deliver the mail. What people do with the message is up to them. I used to worry when I would preach a sermon that nobody said anything about. “Was it a failure? Did I say something wrong?” Or when I would counsel people and they wouldn’t change. After the appointment, I’m thinking, “The Lord really spoke through me today.” And a week later, it’s like we never spoke at all; the person is still where they were before I talked with them. Stephen’s experience is a great reminder that people change very slowly. Saul will eventually become Paul but it will take a while for the truth of what Stephen said to sink in. Don’t judge what you say by how people respond. Focus on being as clear and as truthful as you can be and leave the results in God’s hands. Our job is just to deliver the mail. God’s job is to convince them. But if we focus more on people’s response to what we say rather than on the accuracy of what we say, we’ll either be discouraged or find ourselves speaking more and more to please people rather than to please God.

The third truth we learn from the story of Stephen is the most surprising of all: your last day will be your best day. *“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.”* (Acts 7:54-60) There are few things more terrifying than an angry mob and that is exactly what happens here. The Council and the crowd are so angry they grab Stephen and carry him bodily out of the city and stone him to death. All pretense of a fair trial is gone. This is mob rule, similar to what we’re seeing in the Middle East with the lawless men of ISIS justifying the evil they do in the name of religion. Stephen is the first Christian to die for his faith and he dies a horrible and terrifying death. Some of you might ask, “How can a loving God let one of His most faithful servants to be killed in this way?” Stephen would answer, “Actually, it was the greatest experience of my life. I saw heaven open and the glory of God and Jesus standing at God’s right hand, welcoming me into heaven. I wouldn’t trade that experience for anything. In fact, after seeing Jesus, if I had to choose between living and dying, I would have immediately chosen death in order to be with Him.” We all fear death – or at least dying. Maybe it’s the fear of the unknown or the fear of pain; but the fear of death is a very real fear. The story of Stephen reminds us why the Christian doesn’t need to fear death. In John 8:51, Jesus says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.”* What does Jesus mean? Everybody dies, don’t they? The death rate never changes. Nobody gets out of here alive. The experience of Stephen provides an answer. For Stephen, death was simply stepping out of this life and into the next. And if you had asked Stephen, “Don’t you want to go on living?” he would reply, “Are you kidding? To depart and be with Christ is so much better.” Theologians call this, “Dying Grace,” the experience of God’s grace we have at the moment of death as Jesus leads us from this life to the next. He promised that He would never leave us or forsake us, and the first face Stephen sees as he dies is the face of Jesus. That’s the reason Jesus became a human – so that we could live forever with Him. He lives the life we failed to live, perfectly obeying God so that God can credit His perfect record of obedience to everyone who asks Him to be their Savior and Lord. He dies the death we deserve to die, bearing our punishment for sin on the

cross so that God can forgive us and declare that we are holy, blameless and perfect because Jesus is holy, blameless and perfect. And then Jesus goes before us to prepare a place in heaven for us. That's why Stephen sees Jesus standing at God's right hand as our advocate and representative. Jesus opens heaven's gates to us and welcomes us even in the most horrific of deaths. That's why Stephen could die as Jesus died; saying, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" He was so overwhelmed with Christ's love and forgiveness for him that he was compelled to extend that same forgiveness to his murderers. We expect death to be horrible and we fear it. What if we're wrong? What if dying is our greatest experience yet of Christ's presence and love? What if your last day is your best day?

From one perspective, Stephen's death is a tragedy. Why would a loving God allow one of His most faithful servants to die like that? It seems like such a waste. Yet as we'll see in the coming weeks, Stephen's death results in the gospel going to people the Jews would never have expected it to go to; as well as in the salvation of Paul who will become one of the greatest heroes of the faith even though at this point, no one would have ever expected him to become a Christian. So much of our frustration and unhappiness in life can be traced directly back to our unrealistic expectations and our belief that our plan for our life is better than God's plan for our life.

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