

This evening we are going to look at the story of the stoning of Stephen. It's actually quite a wonderful story – a great story from which to proclaim the gospel. It's a sad story, of course, because Stephen was brutally murdered. But at the same time is a story of great hope because Stephen's death is not ultimately a tragedy because he dies with the confidence that the Lord would receive his spirit. That and the striking contrast between Stephen and his killers makes the story a wonderful presentation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Stephen believed that the good news of Jesus was so good that it was worth dying for. That is quite a statement to make. In the providence of God, Stephen had been placed in a position where telling the truth to his opponents about Jesus and their sin of rejecting him would cost him his life. He may not have known when he started that his opponents would kill him, but he surely knew that danger. After all it was not that long before that Jesus had been crucified. And there is a remarkable parallel between Jesus' experience which led to his death and Stephen's experience which led to his death.

Both Jesus and Stephen had debated with the Jews concerning the significance of the law of Moses and of the temple in the light of Jesus. Both Jesus and Stephen had been accused by false witnesses. The claims of the false witnesses had been the same in both cases – the accusation that Jesus had said that he would destroy the temple. Both Jesus and Stephen had been hauled up before the Jewish council. The parallels are striking. Stephen would have known that he might lose his life if he kept on going. But he did keep on going – to some extent echoing Jesus in his confronting the Jews with the fact that by killing Jesus they had followed the pattern of their forefathers who had killed the prophets. Stephen would have known that he might well end up giving his life – and yet he kept going.

And behind that was the great conviction that the message of Jesus was worth dying for. To literally give his life in the service of Christ was worth doing. Jesus had made that clear when he said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). That profound saying of Jesus is true figuratively, but it is also true literally. Stephen was not the loser because he was martyred. He was a gainer. As Paul would say later on – for the believer – "to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21).

That is one of the most glorious blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus has won the victory over death for all of his people. When we die physically, we go to be with Jesus – we enter heaven where we enjoy fellowship with God while we await our resurrection from the dead. The joys of heaven are far greater than anything we have known on earth. And that puts everything in this life into perspective. That is the wonderful truth that underlies this story of the martyrdom of Stephen.

This story is full of gospel truth. One of the fundamental biblical truths that it illustrates is how the preaching of the good news is preceded by the preaching of our sinfulness and the way towards salvation includes submitting to what the Bible says about our sinfulness. The people who stoned Stephen to death had heard

the biblical message about their sinfulness and rather than humbling themselves before God and acknowledging their sins, they became furious.

Stephen had not minced words when he confronted the Jewish leaders with their sins. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your father's 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 the angels and did not keep it" (Acts 7:51-53). And how did they respond? Verse 54, "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him."

That is one way of responding when the biblical message exposes our sins and our sinfulness. It is an understandable way of responding. No one likes to hear about their sinfulness. John expresses this profoundly in John 3:20, where he says, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." This is how we all are by nature. We hate the light that exposes our sins. And when we are confronted with our sins the most natural response is anger. But that response closes the way to salvation. The way to salvation involves submitting to the convicting message of the Bible that we are sinners and worthy of condemnation.

We see a very different response to the convicting message in some of those who heard Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. Peter had accused his hearers of the same thing that Stephen had accused his hearers of. Acts 2:23, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." And Acts 2:36, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus, whom you crucified." But listen to this response. Acts 2:37, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers what shall we do?'" And here is the Peter's answer to that question, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Two different responses to the convicting message of the Bible. One response leads to repentance and forgiveness and the other response leads to anger and bitterness and hatred. How we respond to the biblical message that we are sinners before a holy God determines whether we end up forgiven and enroute to heaven or whether we end up angry and bitter and enroute to eternal condemnation. The people who killed Stephen were confronted with their sin, and instead of humbling themselves before God and asking how they might be saved, they were filled with rage and they expressed that rage by stoning Stephen to death.

And that rage and that hatred is a foreshadowing of hell. It is significant that in his descriptions of hell Jesus refers to the people in hell gnashing their teeth. A number of times in the gospels we hear him saying, "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:12). One commentator, commenting on Matthew 8:12 says, "'Gnashing of teeth' is often an aggressive expression of hostility and anger..." (Nolland).

In their fury against Stephen, these men are foreshadowing one of the realities of hell. They were not, of course, experiencing the fullness of the reality of hell, but they were foreshadowing a part of it. The inhabitants of hell will gnash their teeth in their hatred and anger towards God and his people. The hatred that the world feels towards God and his people will consume the lost for all eternity.

There is something else about these people that demonstrates a characteristic of the world in its opposition to God and his people. When Stephen said that he saw “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God,” we are told that “They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears....” They stopped their ears. Stephen was telling them the truth. He was describing reality. He was describing the ascended and glorified Jesus at the right hand of God. But they stopped their ears. They would not listen. They refused to hear what he was saying.

In Romans 1:18, Paul describes the world in its opposition to God and he says that they “suppress the truth.” That is what these murderers of Stephen were doing. By stopping their ears, they were suppressing the truth. This is what the world does when it comes to the truth about God and his will as it is revealed in nature and in the Scriptures. The world has discovered a great deal of truth, but it suppresses the truth about God that puts everything else in perspective.

One of the striking ways that that is happening in our day is by the so called cancel culture. Those who oppose the agenda of the radical left are not heard and their opinions discussed, they are cancelled. They are shouted down. Their message is not even heard. They are cancelled. That is not to say that everyone who experiences this “cancelling” is speaking God’s truth, but often those who speak against the agenda of the radical left are speaking the truth and the progressives stop their ears. They cancel those with opinions that contradict the prevailing orthodoxy concerning sexuality and gender and abortion and many other areas. These men who stopped their ears against the truth that Stephen was speaking are the forerunners of the cancel culture in our day. The truth about God is suppressed.

Now there is a striking contrast between Stephen and his killers that helps us to see the contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Those who were about to kill Stephen were filled with rage and hatred. Stephen is heavenly minded and at peace. Stephen’s killers were exhibiting some of the works of the flesh while Stephen was exhibiting some of the fruit of the Spirit. The works of the flesh as Paul lists them in various places include things like enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy. “The fruit of the Spirit is love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self- control.” (Galatians 5:19-23). In Romans 14:17 Paul writes, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy.”

We see something of this contrast in Stephen’s killers and Stephen as they are described in these verses. Stephen here is an example of attitudes that all followers of Jesus should be reflecting in their lives. And his opponents are examples of the hatred and destructiveness that is inherent in godlessness. That is not to say

that all believers are as advanced as Stephen is here and that all unbelievers are as full of hatred as Stephen's killers are here, but both Stephen and his killers are reflecting tendencies that are inherent in their respective allegiances.

The contrast between Stephen and his killers here shows us the beauty of godliness and the ugliness of ungodliness. And that contrast is a powerful motivation for us to pursue godliness and repent of ungodliness.

Now let's look at some of the specifics in Luke's description of Stephen. Verse 55 says, "But he, [Stephen] full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. That is how he has been described all the way along. He was characteristically full of the Holy Spirit. Now all of God's people have the Holy Spirit, but some of God's people are more full of the Holy Spirit than others are and some of that difference as to do with our responsibility. Some of the difference has to do with the sovereignty of God, but some of it has to do with how we pray for and seek for a greater fullness of the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 4:30 Paul tells us not to "grieve the Holy Spirit" and in Ephesians 5:18 he tells us to "be filled with the Spirit." We can be more or less filled with the Spirit and some that has to do with the use of the means of grace of Scripture, sacraments, and prayer. Stephen's example also shows us that the Lord does give his people an extra measure of the Holy Spirit in times of need such as Stephen was experiencing here. In the book of Acts we regularly read that those who were being persecuted were full of the Holy Spirit.

It is a great comfort and encouragement for us to remember that if we ever are persecuted like Stephen is being persecuted here or even in less extreme ways, we can trust that Jesus will grant an extra measure of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to stand firm.

Further in his moment of great need as he was facing death, God enabled him to see into heaven. We are told that Stephen was gazing into heaven and when he described it, he said that he saw "the heavens opened." So he was enabled to see into heaven and he sees "the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." So God encourages Stephen as he is facing death by stoning by allowing him to see into heaven – to see the glory of God and to see Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

God gave Stephen exactly what he needed to comfort and strengthen him in the face of death. He allowed Stephen to see a reality that is always there but is usually hidden from our sight and that is the reality of the glory of God and of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It was a powerful reminder to Stephen of the reality of God and Jesus at his right hand. It put everything into perspective. There is more to reality than we normally see with our eyes. Part of the reality that Stephen was facing was the hatred of his opponents and the reality of his approaching death. But God was showing him that there is more to reality than what we see with our physical eyes. There is a glorious God in heaven. And Jesus is at his right hand. Stephen's death was

not outside of God's control. God was allowing it to happen. And that God had promised Stephen eternal life through faith in Jesus.

It is significant that Jesus is standing. Usually he is described as sitting at God's right hand. The sitting symbolizes his rule. He is sitting next to God on his throne. But here Jesus is standing. That signifies the extra care and concern that the Lord was feeling about his faithful servant as he was facing death at the hands of this angry mob. The standing position expresses that fact that Stephen has the Lord's full attention. Hebrews 4:15 expresses this same thought when it says that our Lord sympathizes with our weaknesses. So does Zechariah 2:8 where God's people are assured, "he who touches you touches the apple of his eye."

What a beautiful and comforting picture this is – Stephen being stoned to death and God allowing Stephen to see his glory and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It is another way of picturing what we read of in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me."

And while we are not promised a literal vision of the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand in our suffering and when we walk the valley of the shadow of death, Stephen's vision applies to us as much as it did to Stephen. That is the nature of the wonderful things we read of in the Bible. They are not only meant for those who first witnessed them. They are also meant for those who come after and read of them in the Bible.

Furthermore, even if do not see a literal vision, part of being saved means that our eyes are opened to see the glory of God and the glory of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul writes, "For God, who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In Colossians 3:1-4 he tells us to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God – [to] Set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.... [and] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

All of this is not far removed from what God enabled Stephen to see as he was being stoned to death. And these things that we are enabled to see by faith and the illumination of the Holy Spirit are an incredible comfort for us as we think of and face the reality of death. It puts death in a whole other perspective. The things that God enabled Stephen to see – his own glory and Jesus standing at God's right hand – were an incredible comfort for Stephen as he faced death by stoning. These same realities have enabled many saints through the centuries and still today to face persecution including martyrdom with courage and expectation. And they have enabled the saints of God who were not called to be martyrs to face their own death with comfort and hope.

That comfort and hope is expressed by Stephen as the stones were knocking the life from his body. Verse 59, "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.'" And here he was echoing our Lord as he was dying on the cross and said "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46).

Both Jesus and Stephen expressed confidence in dying that their spirit would leave their bodies and be received by God in heaven. That is why those called to martyrdom can die with calmness and hope. And that is why all of God's people can die with calmness and hope. That does not mean that all of God's people will experience that confidence to the same degree. There are many variables. But this is the reality of dying for the people of God. Their faith may be stronger or weaker as they approach death, but the reality of life with God after death for God's people is not diminished by the strength or the weakness of one's faith. And it is one of the most glorious truths of the gospel that we live our lives knowing that death is not the end, but the beginning of a much fuller experience of life beyond this life.

As Paul puts it in 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."

One final point. Stephen died praying for the forgiveness of the people who were killing him. Verse 60 "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." We have seen how Stephen's end leading to his death mirrored the end and death of our Lord in a number of ways. The meaning of Stephen's death was not the same as the death of our Lord, of course, but there were a lot of similarities – including the prayer for forgiveness of those who were killing him. Our Lord said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

What a powerful expression of the transforming power of the gospel! Jesus, of course, was not transformed. He was expressing his own perfect love as he prayed for the forgiveness of his killers. Stephen was expressing the love that came as a result of the transforming work of Christ in his heart.

Forgiveness is not what we do naturally because of our sinful natures. Hate is what comes naturally to a fallen sinful human being. The kind of love that Stephen showed here was the result of him being full of the Holy Spirit. This kind of love comes from the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in those who are saved by grace.

Forgiving those who have sinned against us is one of the key commands to those who are saved by grace. It is one of many, of course, but it is mentioned often and with great emphasis. Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither, will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Our calling to forgive others is rooted in God's forgiveness of our sins. We have sinned against God far, far more than anyone has ever sinned against God and that is a powerful incentive for us to forgive those who sin against us. It is one of the way that we are to reflect the character of God in our lives. Stephen is a powerful example of this in his prayer that God would not hold the sin of stoning him against his killers.

Without forgiveness there can be no peace and harmony. Without forgiveness the cycle of violence and hatred continues to escalate. There are plenty of examples in history and in what is going on in our world today and perhaps in our own lives to illustrate the destructive nature of an unwillingness to forgive, but also there are examples of forgiveness leading to peace and reconciliation.

The good news of salvation in Jesus is about the peace that is possible because of forgiveness – first between God and man and then between people. Jesus became a man, suffered and died to bring peace on earth. And as long as we are not perfected we will need to forgive one another in order for there to be peace. Stephen is a wonderful example of what is possible for believers through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The way he died is a wonderful example of the beauty of the Christian life as God intends it to be. And the rage and hatred of those who killed him a picture of life apart from God. When Paul quotes from the OT to describe the sinfulness of man he writes, “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness, their feet are swift to shed blood; in their path is ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” (Romans 3:14-17).

Let us see in this story the beauty of the way of life that Jesus died to enable us to live and the ugliness of the life of sin and may that be an encouragement for us to be diligent and zealous in reflecting the beauty of Jesus in our lives.