

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH MURDERED PROPHETS

Acts 7:51-8:3

INTRODUCTION

I think one of the difficulties we have as we read the Bible is that the stories and the characters we meet in those stories often appear to be so completely different from us and our own stories. It is often difficult to see how a particular story in the Bible relates to me. The story of Stephen that we have been considering these past few weeks is especially difficult for us. Few of us have ever or will ever be in a situation like the one he is in. Most of us, most likely, are not going to be arrested and forced to defend our faith in Christ. Few, if any of us, are going to be killed for our faith, though I do not think that is as unlikely an event for we Christians in the U.S. as it might have been 50 years ago.

The reason I believe that this passage is very relevant to us is because of what I believe about the Bible. I believe, as I trust you do as well, what the apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, ready for ever good work." In other words, this passage is not just written for missionaries and pastors or for those who live in Moslem or Hindu countries but for every Christian man and woman to teach us, to reprove us, to correct us and to train us so that we will be competent in living like Christians. So this morning, if you have any interest in being a Christian and living like a Christian, then this passage is written for you. If you do not want to be a Christian and you do not care to live like a Christian then this passage, indeed the entire Bible, has nothing for you. So Luke's recording of this event is not simply done to prepare us to be martyrs but also to prepare us to be Christians.

The central feature of this passage is Stephen's vision of Jesus in heaven, standing at God's right hand (vv. 55-56). What Stephen sees is exactly what Jesus told these same men at his trial would be his situation in the future with one difference. As we just had read for us, Jesus, when asked by Caiphas, the high priest, if he was the Messiah, said, "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." When Jesus gave that answer he was using two OT passages to describe himself. First he was referring to Psalm 110:1 where David writes, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." In Psalm 110 David records a conversation between God the Father and God the Son in which the Father promises the Son that he will share in his glory and authority and will one day rule over all his enemies. Second Jesus was referring to Daniel 7:13-14 where Daniel reports a vision of the future that God gave to him and says, "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." The Jews understood that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah and that is why they killed him. Now Stephen is given a vision of the reality that Jesus predicted and he reports seeing that reality to these same men. It is for the same reason they killed Jesus that they now kill Stephen.

However, there is a startling difference between what Jesus says and what Stephen sees. Stephen does not see Jesus sitting at God's right hand but standing at God's right hand. In every other reference to Jesus being at the right hand of God, it is stated that he is seated, in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1. So it is not incidental that Jesus is standing in Stephen's vision. Why is Jesus standing and not sitting? Jesus being seated at God's right hand emphasizes Jesus' having finished the work he was given to do on earth and now sharing in God's glory. It emphasizes his ongoing ministry of intercession for his people at God's right hand. It emphasizes the fact that he is waiting for that day when God sends him on the clouds of heaven to return and consummate the work he began by destroying his enemies, saving his people and making a new heavens and a new earth. However, his standing in Stephen's vision shows that he is not simply passively sitting around right now. He is actively involved in this world and especially in his church. He is right now taking action on behalf of his people. He is

currently exercising his power to enable us to fulfill all of his purposes on this earth. So God gives Stephen this vision and has Luke record it for us so that we will know that right now Jesus is at work in us and through us and for us. So what we observe Stephen doing and saying in this passage is the result of Jesus working in and for Stephen. Right now, the crucified, resurrected, exalted and standing Lord Jesus Christ is at work in and through his church.

MAIN POINT

Jesus exercises his sovereign power on behalf of his people so that we...

I. Speak the truth uncompromisingly (vv. 51-53 & 56)

The most striking thing about vv. 51-53 to us as we read this passage is how out of place they appear to be. Stephen has been giving a very basic summary of the history of Israel and out of the blue he uses this incredibly harsh and condemning language. It is the intensity of these verses that are the proof that how we have read what precedes it is correct. Stephen was not simply telling a bunch of Jewish men a story they all knew but he was using the history of Israel to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and that they, like Israel throughout their history, rejected God's prophet when they killed Jesus. This is the main point he makes in this conclusion. Every word of v. 51 is a word that is used repeatedly in the OT to describe Israel throughout their history by God himself. Just listen to these few examples so that you can feel what Stephen is saying to them. **Exodus 33:3**, "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." **Jeremiah 19:15**, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words." **Jeremiah 6:10**, "To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it." **Jeremiah 9:26**, "... all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart." **Isaiah 63:10**, "But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them." Finally, in **Numbers 27:14** God describes what Israel did at Meribah, when they questioned whether God was able to provide them with water as resistance to him, using the same word Stephen uses here.

By using this language Stephen is demonstrating that these people have simply followed in the footsteps of their forefathers in being stiff-necked against God's commands, acting like uncircumcised people who have no knowledge of God or his word and resisting him and his commands at every turn. The chief evidence that this is true is that just as their ancestors murdered the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, they killed the one that the prophets said would come (v.52). They did this in spite of the fact that they had been given God's word in which this Righteous One and his coming were described (v.53). Stephen not only tells them the truth about themselves but he also, when he sees the vision of heaven opening and Jesus standing at the right hand of God does not hesitate to tell these angry people what he sees. He can see that they are furious with him and yet he adds fuel to the fire by asserting that he can see the Son of Man standing at God's right hand. No one else could see what he saw and so he didn't have to tell them what he saw and yet he did. Why does he speak like this? Verse 56 almost feels like he is trying to commit suicide by mob violence.

Why is it that God has spoken with such harshness throughout the centuries? This is such rude and uncompromising language. How can you possibly expect people to respond to this kind of language with anything but the anger we witness in the following verses? Stephen is just getting what he asked for by talking like this, isn't he? Does God really expect us to talk like this with others? I do not think we have to use these same words but we do have to communicate this same truth to others. These particular words are used by Stephen because of who he is talking to. We will see as we work our way through Acts and read other sermons that other language is used with other audiences. But we will also see that this same basic assessment of human beings as stiff-necked, obstinate and resistant to God will consistently be made. We must, when we are explaining to people the good news of Christ's coming and dying tell people the bad news about why he had to come and die. The bad news is that we are, every one of us, by nature, wicked sinners who hate God and resist

him at every turn. We are willing slaves to sin and have no ability to love God or people because we do not want to do so. In addition, like Stephen, we must tell them that Jesus is the only way to go to heaven, in spite of the fact that virtually every person who you and I live around does not believe it is possible that there can be only one way to go to heaven. Not a single member of Stephen's audience at the time he said this thought he was telling them the truth. In fact, as you can see from their response they were utterly sure that he was wrong about them and about Jesus. Yet, Stephen had to tell them the truth, just like we have to tell people the truth about themselves and about Jesus.

For over 300 years people smoked tobacco without any knowledge of the harmful effects of smoking on their health. Then in the 1960's information began to become available as to the devastating impact of smoking tobacco. However, what really made people mad was the discovery in the 1980's that the tobacco companies themselves knew for years that smoking was harmful. Not only did they seek to cover up that information but they continued to manufacture cigarettes with even more lethal doses of the cancer producing agents and higher concentrations of nicotine to increase tobacco's addictive properties. In fact, up until 1998 when the "Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement" was signed by 46 states and the tobacco companies, individuals were successfully suing tobacco companies because of their failure to adequately and in a timely fashion inform the public of what they knew. These companies were held liable because people have a right to know if something you produce is dangerous. If you do not know that something that is pleasurable is dangerous then you will take no action to avoid the danger. Therefore, it is neither ethical nor loving to not tell people about the danger they face nor to hide from them the means by which the danger may be avoided. There are a lot of smokers who will get mad at you if you tell them about the dangers of smoking. I'm sure there are many who do not like the fact that cigarettes cost a lot more than they would if not for the tobacco settlement and the taxes imposed to fund anti-smoking campaigns and health care costs associated with smoking. However, does the ire of smokers mean we should not make the dangers of smoking public? Should we permit the tobacco companies to hide the negative impact of smoking? Of course not. In the same way it is immoral and unloving for those of us who know the truth to not tell people the truth about themselves and the danger they are in and how Jesus is the only one who can save them from that danger. Parents, you must tell that smiling little child that you love that she is a terrible sinner and will most certainly go to hell if she does not trust Jesus as her Savior and Lord. You must tell your helpful neighbor who volunteers at ECHO and snowblows your sidewalk but who has no interest in God that he is a rebel against the God who gives him everything and that God is furious with him and that he must turn from his many sins and trust in Jesus.

Jesus is right now standing at God's right hand to send forth his HS to enable all of us to boldly and compassionately tell others that their biggest problem is that they are always resisting the HS and thus they are subject to God's just condemnation. Jesus is right now enabling all of his people to faithfully and clearly declare that he is the only one who can rescue you from the wrath of God. Obviously, I am not recommending that you be intentionally obnoxious and rude. There are many ways to help people see what is true. However, in the end we must not shrink back from telling people the awful truth that they are sinners and the glorious truth that God has provided one great savior for sinners and his name is Jesus.

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II. Suffer and die well, like Jesus (vv. 54-60 & 8:1-3)

It is quite clear that Luke, in recording the death of Stephen is making clear connections to the death of Jesus with a couple of very striking differences. The similarities are these: the people who kill him are the same people who killed Jesus. Stephen is killed outside the city of Jerusalem just like Jesus. The reason they kill Stephen is the same reason they killed Jesus, it is for the charge of blasphemy. Jesus said he was the Messiah who shared in God's glory and Stephen says Jesus is the Messiah who shares in God's glory. The three things that Stephen says are the same three things that Jesus said. Both confess that Jesus is the Son of Man who

comes in the glory of the Lord; both Jesus and Stephen commit their spirit into the keeping of God and both Jesus and Stephen ask God to have mercy on those who murder them. The striking differences between what Stephen says and what Jesus says are these: Jesus says he will be sitting at God's right hand and Stephen sees Jesus sitting there. Jesus commits his spirit into the hands of God the Father and Stephen commits his spirit into the hands of Jesus. Jesus asks his Father to forgive those who harmed him but Stephen asks Jesus to forgive them. In other words, Stephen clearly sees Jesus as God. Here is another evidence of the Trinity.

Luke, by making these obvious similarities clear is showing us by the story what Jesus and the rest of the NT says repeatedly: everyone who follows Jesus must expect to suffer like Jesus. Listen to just a few of those statements. *Luke 9:23*, "Everyone who comes after me must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me." *Matthew 10:22*, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." *Romans 8:17*, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." *1 Peter 2:20-21*, "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." *1 Peter 4:12-13*, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

How does Jesus strengthen Stephen so that he can suffer and die well? First, the vision of Jesus standing is clearly a declaration to Stephen that everything is going according to plan. Jesus is not standing idly by while Stephen suffers at the hands of these violent men but Jesus has ordained this suffering just like his Father ordained his suffering. Again, let me remind you of how strongly the book of Acts says that everything that those wicked men did to Jesus was exactly what God wanted them to do. *Acts 4:27-28*, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." God through Jesus ordains, commands, sends the sufferings that we endure. He does it for our eternal good and for his eternal glory. Second, Jesus approves of Stephen and is standing ready to welcome him into heaven. That is why Stephen asks the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. He is able to face the suffering and death because he knows that suffering and death are not the end of the story. He knows that death is gain. He is going to meet Jesus and this hatred of men and this suffering and this death cannot separate him from the one he loves but will be the means by which he enters into the joy of his master. Third, the standing Christ is ready to execute his justice upon those who hate Stephen, thus he does not need to exact retribution upon his enemies. He knows that it is indeed true that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. It is true when God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Because Jesus sees all and is in charge of executing his justice, Stephen does not need to defend himself or hate those who hate him.

Here is a vision that God has given to each one of his children. I cannot think of a more helpful thing to know than that the crucified Jesus is right now ruling from heaven, ready to receive you into eternal joy. Our Lord Jesus, as you suffer and as you come to the end of your life and face death is standing at God's right hand. He is ruling over the suffering and the death. He is ready to welcome you into the joy of heaven and nothing can separate you from that fact. He is prepared to judge all who harm us and so we are free to not hate or to seek our own revenge.

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III. Love our enemies and pray for their salvation (vv. 56 & 60)

The last thing that Stephen says before he dies at the hands of these murderers is this, "Lord, do not hold this sins against them." First of all, what exactly is he asking Jesus to not do? He is asking Jesus to not hand these

men over to their sins. He is asking Jesus to not deal with these men according to their sin of murder but to deal with them in accordance with his mercy and love. He is asking his Lord to become their Lord, to save them from their sins. Stephen is following the example of Jesus and obeying the command of Jesus when he said, **Matthew 5:43-44**, “You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” Stephen, like Jesus before him, loves these men who hate him. All that Stephen has said here, including the really harsh, confrontational things he has said has been motivated by love for these men who are so angry with him. He was not being condescending or angry or self-righteous in his preaching. He loved these men and was pleading with them to hear and see and turn. The world we live in cannot comprehend this. The culture of which we are a part cannot believe that speaking in such absolute terms about truth and with such condemnation of human beings can be done in love. This is hate speech, not the speech of love. Yet, what greater love can be expressed than this, that as you are murdered unjustly you pray not for God’s judgment to fall upon your enemies but God’s mercy. All who know Christ are motivated by love for others. No greater joy do we have than others, including our enemies, know the joy of being loved and forgiven by God.

How do you be a person who loves your enemies and prays for God’s mercy to fall upon them rather than God’s curse? We can see two things in this text. First, notice that the chief characteristic of these enemies is that they are always resisting the HS while the chief characteristic of Stephen is that he is filled with the HS. Stephen is Jewish. Stephen knows that his ancestors are the same ancestors of these men. He knows that he is a member of that race of people whom God handed over to worship the hosts of heaven. How is it that he is not resisting the HS but filled with the HS? He did not fill himself with the HS. God had mercy upon him. He is full of the Spirit by an act of God’s grace, his unmerited, free, sovereign determination to do good to Stephen. In other words, Jesus did not hold his sins against him, but loved him, contrary to what he deserved. So he knows that the only reason he is the one being killed and not in the crowd of killers is grace and so he has pity upon these poor blind men and asks for grace for them. When you look at people trapped in some sin or who are full of hatred towards Christians, what do you think? Do you think, “how can they be so evil and stupid?” or do you think, “I’m no different except for grace. How can I help them to see?” Second, he is free to love his enemies and not hate them because he knows that if God does not have mercy upon them then God will justly punish them for their sins. He is free to love and not hate because God is the judge, not him.

I want you to note here that we are introduced in this story to an individual who is the chief character in the book of Acts from chapter 13 through chapter 28. His Hebrew name is Saul and his Greek name is Paul, the great apostle. This man who approves of Stephens death wrote half of the NT. But notice how Luke, who we will discover became good friends of Paul, introduces him. He is not only instrumental in the death of Stephen but he is a major instigator in the persecution of the church which follows. If you’ve read ahead you know that in chapter 9 Jesus does not hold his sin of murdering Stephen and other Christians against him but does instead save him. In other words, Jesus answers the prayer of dying Stephen by saving Saul who, humanly speaking, is the reason that you and I are sitting here this morning. Stephen’s love and prayer for his enemies was part of the means God used to convert Saul and bring the gospel to us. There is a real sense that we are Christians because Stephen loved and prayed for his enemies. What great good God might do through us if we will rest in the love and justice of our great Savior and thus love and pray for our enemies.

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- *Suffer and die well, like Jesus*
- *Love our enemies now while we await final judgment*

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