

Stephen Ministry

Easter 5

Pastor Josh Frazee

Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last weekend we heard briefly about the young man named Stephen. But just who was he? Why was he put to death for the faith? How did he get into such a position? These are the questions we will be examining this morning.

Verse 1

To give you the proper historical context, here are the things which had happened before Stephen was mentioned. Jesus had ascended into heaven before His disciples. The disciples had chosen Matthias to replace Judas, and then they had awaited the coming Holy Spirit. They received Him at Pentecost, when Peter gave his speech that cut to the very heart of his hearers. The apostles continued to proclaim Jesus and Him crucified and risen to the point that they were taken before the Council. At the Council, they declared that if it were right for them to listen to other human beings or to listen to God, the Council should decide, but that they had a higher authority. The apostles had continued spreading the Word and doing great and miraculous signs in the name of Jesus until they were arrested yet again. Then Gamaliel gave the Council the advice to leave these men alone because they would either come to nothing or they were actually doing the Lord's work.

That is when our text picks up: "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said please the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

Stephen was chosen—among others—and they "were set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." In this way they were consecrated to assist the apostles in the serving of the widows.

Scripture encourages time and again that care be given to widows. But perhaps the most blatant example of this is with Jesus and His own mother. We do not know what became of Joseph, but we do know that when Jesus died on the cross, He took care to assign the disciple whom He loved to take care of His mother Mary. As we heard a couple weeks ago, God is about giving and preserving life from conception all the way to old age, and everywhere in between—which would include His mother and all other widows, all other mothers, and everyone else.

As with Jesus caring for widows, so also Stephen; just look at the next part of our text.

Verse 2

"Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen."

Stephen, after being chosen and consecrated, was doing the tasks to which he had been called, and was doing quite well at it. He demonstrated both “grace and power” and “great wonders and signs.” Yet despite his good work, he was called into debate. But the interesting thing about this debate is the part of our text which is left out. This is what it said:

“(T)hey could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’”

Last week we heard how Stephen was like our Lord Christ in His response, but even here in this debate against him, he is like Christ. In Jesus’ trial, there were those who were called to testify who brought up false charges against Him; and here Stephen has the same thing happen to him.

Verse 3

While Stephen is falsely accused like Christ, though, Stephen replied whereas Christ did not. The high priest asked him, “‘Are these things so?’” And Stephen replies with a fifty-one verse speech about their shared history starting with Abraham and leading up to Jesus. He concluded his speech with some of the words we heard from our reading, “‘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.’”

This time our account sounds more like Peter’s speech given at Pentecost. Both Stephen and he named their hearers as the ones who betrayed and murdered Jesus, the Righteous One. But the outcome, as you heard a few minutes ago, was very different. For Peter, the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of his hearers to produce guilt and repentance. For Stephen’s hearers, our text continues: “when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 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. but they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 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. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.”

What is our reaction to the Law? Do we get struck to the very heart by it and desire not to continue sinning? Or do we get angry and grind our teeth? This may partly depend on the sin. Some sins are easier to admit are wrong and stop doing than others; but to God, a sin is a sin is a sin.

Today, when we hear His voice, what will our response to our Shepherd, Jesus the Righteous One, be? Will it be repentance, or will it be anger?

Jesus Christ has paid the price for your sins and mine, just as He had for Stephen’s and Peter’s and those of all the rest of the disciples and apostles. He died for

your sins and mine, and has called us by His Gospel to live the new life, proclaiming His death and resurrection like Stephen, and Peter, and the rest of the apostles and disciples. And Stephen's ministry would have an affect later on on this young man named Saul, whose name would later be Paul.

Stephen's ministry, like all ministry which proclaims the Law and the Gospel, is used by God. After Stephen was stoned to his death, did these people continue against the Gospel of Christ or did they repent and live the new life? Immediately after our text, this is what it says, "And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church..."

Each and every sin you and I have committed and every good we have omitted—no matter how big or how small in your eyes or my eyes or our nation's eyes—were suffered for and died for on the cross of Calvary. And to this there are two responses: joyful repentance or angry refusal. We know that Jesus does not take the suffering of His faithful sitting down; but what is His response to those who angrily refuse?

He works with them for a time. Saul was not made Paul yet. But how long will it be called today? The Scriptures say "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion (Hebrews 3:15b)."

And if you who have been called by the Gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection don't resist, the Holy Spirit will give you a heart of flesh so that you repent and live the new life in Him—just like the apostles and disciples, just like Stephen, and just as Saul would later as Paul. In Jesus' Name. Amen.