

July 21, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

I See the Heavens Opened

Acts 7:1 – 60

In 2009, four young men, Omar, Abdul and two of their friends came to Christ from Islam in the Middle East. In 2012, Abdul was first severely beaten, and then a month later, shot by a Muslim Imam because he was confessing Christ. Abdul is still in a hospital, hovering precariously between life and death. His friend Omar was taken into police custody immediately after the shooting, where blame for the incident was shifted on him in order to protect powerful tribal leaders in the area. While at the police station, a policeman told the shooter, who was detained along with Omar who had been in the car; 'Now is the time to kill all these boys off because if you don't do it now, the number of Christians will be so many that you won't be able to stop them anymore'. Omar was released and immediately went into hiding. But when he was recently interviewed by International Christian Concern, he had this to say: ***'I will never deny Christ. I will continue the work God has called me to by sharing my faith with my Muslim friends. For this I am willing to die!'***

When I hear stories about young men like Omar and Abdul, and the story we heard last week about Fatima; and I read accounts like this in the book of Acts of a man named Stephen, I am massively challenged about my own commitment to Christ. Am I that committed? Would I be that steadfast? Could I say at the moment of crisis – 'For this I am willing to die?' And what does it take for someone to be able to say this with fearless courage and unhesitating confidence? As we saw last week, every real Christian knows that sooner or later he might have to testify to the infinite worth of Jesus Christ with his life, and to boldly say, ***I am unto death a Christian.*** We understood that followers of Jesus are those who are fully engaged in the cause to which they have been called by the gospel; they really believe that what they believe is really real; they understand that opposition and persecution will come; but they can courageously proclaim the good news of the gospel because to them, Jesus is more precious than life itself.

We can see that played out in this passage this morning, in the life of Stephen – the first Christian to lay down his life for the cause of Christ. This is a really long passage and is quite a challenge to preach through, and I'm sure some of you are anxious thinking about how long this is going to take, given the fact that that we rarely take even short chapters in one sitting. But I just want to point out three things this morning about this section that I think will put it in perspective for you and give you an understanding of just what this story means and how it applies to you and I. Almost the entire chapter is taken up with Stephen's powerful sermon to the Council and we don't have the time to take it verse by verse. But what we'll do is look at this passage by looking at what Stephen said, what Stephen saw, and what Stephen did. What he said, what he saw and what he did.

First, **what did Stephen say?** What he said is vitally important because it became the very reason for his death in the end. What was it that so angered these guys that they were moved to murder him? I would remind you that these were the very people who were supposed to be the most moral and righteous people in Jerusalem. These were the guys that defined what was good and godly for the rest. And yet, in the end, they were so impacted by what Stephen said that they killed him. And I don't care how you define good and godly, killing people is never part of that definition. So what did he say?

What Stephen said was a direct response to the charges that were laid against him. If you go back up into chapter 6, verses 13 and 14, you see what they were: ***"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."*** So the charge is that he was speaking against Moses and the Law, and against God and the Temple. And if there were a surefire way to make the Jews of his day mad – that was it – speak against the law, which implied speaking against the biggest hero of their history – Moses; and speaking against the Temple, which implied blasphemy against God.

And so Stephen's defense of these charges, while seemingly very long and tedious, is really very simple. And he does it through a history lesson. First of all he points out that **they have always resisted and disobeyed God.** They are disobedient God-resisters.

Throughout their history, Stephen says, God had raised up deliverers for His people, but they had repeatedly rejected them and disobeyed the law God had given. He begins with the establishment of the nation of Israel through God's call to Abraham and the promises of God to him; and then moves to the story of Joseph and his rejection by the patriarchs, his brothers, and his rescue by God; and then to the longer story of Moses who was raised up as a deliverer but was also rejected by Israel. But God, in His kindness, sent Moses back to lead them out of Egypt. But they ended up turning a fourteen day road trip into a forty year odyssey. And the testimony of their wandering was a continual resistance and disobedience to God. *Our fathers refused to obey him [Moses]; but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'* **Acts 7:39-40**

In other words, the history of the Jewish nation was one of a continual rejection of a God-sent deliverer, and continual disobedience to God. And so if they were basing their charges against Stephen on Moses and the Law, it was a case of the pot calling the kettle black. *"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."* **Acts 7:51-53** Stephen is holding up the mirror to their faces and saying, 'Take a good look. You've had God's Law, but you've never kept it. You've know the right thing to do but you've never done it'. I've found that there are at least two things people really don't want to hear. 'Your child is homely'. And 'You've sinned'. Stephen was not gentle with them. He wasn't very winsome. He's calling them disobedient, stiff-necked, uncircumcised, God-resisting-persecutors, betrayers, and murderers.

And if we step back and look at ourselves, this is who we are before we surrender to Christ. I have to stress again the fact that on the outside, these guys were the pillars of the community. They were so called, God-fearing men, respected and revered in society, leaders in the synagogues – but they were absolutely lost. And what the gospel does first is offend us to the core. The gospel is offensive because it attacks our pride. Stephen says that their hearts and ears were uncircumcised. Circumcision speaks of the cutting away of the flesh – and the most prominent characteristic of the flesh is pride. These guys had never allowed themselves to be humbled. They knew Moses, they knew the Law, they prided themselves on the fact that they were the chosen ones of God. But Stephen exposes the fact that their pride had never been dealt with – they had closed themselves to God to the point that He could not move in them and warm them with His love. Because they preferred their own wisdom to God's wisdom, their ears were uncircumcised as well – closed to the word of God. Relying on their self-righteousness, they could not receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. They opposed everyone and anyone who might have led them to redemption. And in their pride, they even killed the Righteous One.

What is it that keeps some of you from surrendering to Christ? It's your pride. It's your belief that you are okay – you're not that bad – you really don't need a Savior. And what that means is that you haven't seen the depth of your depravity. You really don't know how desperate your situation really is. You need to hear two things from this – an encouragement and a warning. The encouragement is God is patient with you. He does not stop pursuing you because of your sin and your pride. He keeps after you even when you reject Him. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But you also need to hear this: God will not always strive with you. Stephen points out in verse 42 that when Israel persisted in their rejection and disobedience, God gave them over to their own desires: *But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven,* **Acts 7:42** And that is a fearful thing when God turns away and gives you over to your own desires.

The second thing Stephen points out is that the Jews had the Tabernacle in the wilderness: *'Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness...'* Acts 7:44 and they had the Temple built by Solomon: *'But it was Solomon who built a house for Him...'* Acts 7:47 but they still fell into idolatry – they still ran after other gods. Earlier in verse 41, Stephen said that they offered sacrifices to the idol and rejoiced in the works of their hands. In other words, instead of worshiping God, **they worshiped the work of their hands**. And here is the key. Stephen tells them: *Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?'* **Acts 7:48-50** They had the testimony that God dwelt among them but in reality they didn't really worship Him – they worshiped the work of their own hands. The root of evil was that they didn't derive their joy and fulfillment and meaning from God, but rather from the work of their hands. What they could do. What they could achieve. They rejoiced in the work of their hands – not God's.

And this is the very thing Jesus came to destroy. A religion that was based on self-righteousness, self-achievement, self-glory. A religion that gave lip service to God but rejected Him in its heart. It is a telling historical fact that at the time this book was written, the grand Temple, built by Herod to replace the one Solomon had built and the Babylonians had destroyed, the Temple that was one of the seven wonders of the world, that beautiful Temple built to the glory of God – was just an empty shell. When Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem around 582 BC, he destroyed the temple and carried off all the valuable things, including the Ark of the Covenant, which was the heart of the temple. Over the mercy seat of the ark is where God met and spoke with man and without the ark, there was no reason to even have a temple. So by the time Jesus was on the scene, the temple was simply a beautiful, empty building. In fact when General Pompey conquered Jerusalem around 63 B.C., he demanded the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies. When he did, he came out saying that he could not understand what all the interest was about the sanctuary, when it was only an empty room.

And probably what is worse, most of these guys knew the truth. They knew the temple was empty. In a very real sense, God had written over the Temple, '*Ichabod – the glory has departed*'. They said they were worshiping God – but God was gone and what they were worshiping was the work of their own hands. The temple in Jerusalem had become a symbol for many in Israel of what they could do – what they could achieve – the work of their hands. And so the worship of God had become self-worship. So when Jesus said that He would destroy the temple and build another one in three days, one not made with hands, He meant that He would destroy this kind of religion. And Stephen saw this and Stephen preached this and this is what killed him.

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. Acts 7:54 Nothing will make a self-righteous person angrier than the suggestion that all his work is sinful disobedience. But the tragic thing is that the word that was meant to cut through their pride and arrogance and bring repentance and salvation, merely worked to harden them further. When it says here that they were enraged, the word literally means that they were 'sawn in two'. In other words the word of God cut them to the heart – it exposed their real condition. But instead of producing repentance – it enraged them. When you have hardened your heart time and time and time again against the patient love of God that calls you to repent, eventually there is no place left for repentance – only hardness.

But Stephen, Luke says, *full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:55* **Stephen's preaching was powerful because of what he saw.** Stephen saw the glory of God – and he saw Jesus. Luke says that while the Council was gnashing their teeth at him, Stephen wasn't even looking at them – his gaze was heavenward. The expression "grinding or gnashing of teeth" occurs throughout the Bible, where it usually describes someone who is so angry at another that he could devour that person like a wild animal. Stephen was surrounded at that moment by wild animals, but apparently he wasn't even bothered – he had his eyes on the glory of God and Jesus. And this is the key to Christian witness. Our witness is not fueled by our conditions or circumstances but on the glory of God and His Son. What we see in the heavens will determine our course here on earth.

What Stephen saw was **Jesus standing at the right hand of God**. I think this is the only place in the Bible where we see this unusual scene. In the gospels, we are told that when Jesus ascended to the heavens after His resurrection, He was seated at the right hand of God. But here He is pictured standing. What does that mean? What it means is that we have a courtroom scene. In terms of the work of redemption, Jesus took His seat – His work in redemption was done. But in terms of the working out of our salvation, He is standing before the Judge, interceding for us. He is our Advocate with the Father, John tells us. What is an advocate? He is a lawyer, and a lawyer is there to argue your case with the judge. While Stephen is standing before an earthly court that is condemning him, he sees that he is really standing before a heavenly court that is commending him. Jesus is pleading for him with the Father. Hebrews tells us that Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us in the courtroom of heaven.

So what is He saying? How is He pleading to the Judge for us? Well if you go back to Stephen's statement in verse 52 where he refers to Jesus as the **Righteous One**, you begin to pick up on what is happening in heaven. Stephen sees Jesus standing for him before the Judge and Jesus is saying, 'Father, My people have sinned, there is no doubt about that. And sin needs to be punished, righteousness needs to be accomplished. But I have taken that punishment – I paid for it – here's My blood – count My righteousness as theirs. Take my sacrifice and apply it to their account so that there will never be any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'. You see, the only righteousness that is effective in heaven is the righteousness of Christ who lived the life we should have lived. Only He never sinned, only He fulfilled the law of God, and therefore only His sacrifice will suffice.

These guys that put Stephen on trial really had a problem. They were exposed as law breakers – they hadn't kept the law – Stephen made that point emphatically. They had been disobedient to the very law and God they claimed to uphold. They were the ones that stood condemned before the heavenly bench. And what they needed at that point was righteousness – a blameless life. And they couldn't claim that. Stephen wasn't speaking against the Law – he was commending the Law and he was saying 'I'm all for the Law too – we need to fulfill the Law – we can't be saved unless we fulfill the Law – and yet you can't fulfill the Law – your history proves it'. So what's the answer? The answer is the Righteous One. He came and fulfilled the Law they continually broke. He came as the climax to that whole pattern of saviors always being rejected and Israel being disobedient and falling into idolatry.

You see, every other savior, Joseph, Moses, David, delivered the people *in spite of* rejection and suffering; but Jesus Christ delivers His people *through* rejection and suffering and death. Because through this He fulfilled the Law for you. How is that? How does anyone fulfill any law? You either obey it, or you pay the penalty. We have a law on our roads that when you come to a stop sign, you must come to stop, look both ways and then proceed. And there are only two ways to fulfill the law of the stop sign. One is that you come to a stop – that's the way I recommend. The other is to go through the stop sign and get a ticket and then you pay the fine. So if you pay the fine, or better yet, stop at the stop sign, then the law of the stop sign has no more claim on you. You've fulfilled the law. You've either obeyed the law, or you disobeyed but you've paid the penalty.

What Jesus did is live a perfect life – He lived the life we should have lived – He never sinned; and He fulfilled the law of God. He loved God with all His heart and soul and mind and strength and He loved His neighbor as Himself – no other human being has ever done that – so He is righteous in that sense. And He earned the blessing of eternal life. But then He was betrayed and rejected and He suffered and died on the cross and in doing that He paid the penalty we owed – He died the death we should have died. So that when you believe in Him, He becomes your Righteous One. All of the penalty you deserve fell on Him, and all the blessing of righteousness that He earned comes to you – and the heavens are opened to you.

That's what Stephen saw. He saw the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of the Father – the one who took his place – lived the life he should have lived – died the death he should have died – and it didn't *matter* what this earthly court said about him – it didn't matter what anyone said about him – because his Advocate in heaven was speaking for him on his behalf to the Judge of the living and the dead – *and the heavens were opened*. **John Paton**, who was one of the first missionaries to bring the gospel to the cannibals of the South Pacific island of Erromango, knew the reality of this. Speaking later of those times when, surrounded by blood thirsty tribesmen, moments from death, he said: *'His words, 'Lo I am with you always...became so real to me, so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene...I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smiles of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club, or spear was being leveled at my life. Oh the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing 'Him who is invisible'.*

Finally, *look at what Stephen did: 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. Acts 7:57-60* Do you see it? **He prayed for them**. Unless you see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God – unless you see that He lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died – unless you understand how utterly undeserving of forgiveness you are and that it is by grace through faith alone that your sins are washed away and the penalty has been paid – unless you see that, you will never be able to pray for people like this. You'll never have the heart to see your enemies forgiven and heaven opened for them. It is only when you grasp the reality of your sins being forgiven that real compassion for your enemies, those who treat you badly, will fill your soul. It is then and only then that a real, unquenchable desire to see people come to Christ will take control in your heart.

During the cultural revolution in Communist China during the 60's, hundreds of thousands of Christians were beaten, tortured and killed because they would not stop spreading the gospel and they would not renounce Christ. One Christian doctor was targeted by the Red Guard for persecution. Over a period of days, they beat him and tortured him, trying to get him to renounce this Jesus he followed. Finally they hung him with a rope, and then cut him down before he died. But they had left it too long and he died. But just before he died, as he lay there on the floor, he looked at his tormentors and said, *'While I was hanging there, my heart was melting for you'*.

If you belong to Christ – the heavens are opened. And it changes everything in your life. When the heavens are opened to you, everything on earth becomes nothing in comparison to the joy of knowing Jesus. You understand that to be engaged in God's global purpose on earth – calling men and women from every nation to worship the only One in the universe worth worshiping – is worth embracing any earthly risk in view of the staggering heavenly gain. To say with our lips and with our lives that Jesus is more precious than life.

Heavenly Father,

We confess that we have resisted and disobeyed You. We have gone our own way and worshiped the work of our hands because we have not really seen the depth of our willful wickedness and the wonder of Your grace. Open the heavens to us today and let us see Jesus standing at the right hand of God praying for us. Let us see the Righteous One whose perfect life and perfect sacrifice is the ground of our righteousness and the hope of our salvation. Grant that we would see the face and smile of our blessed Lord and the bliss of living and enduring as seeing Him who is invisible. Make us lion-hearted lovers of Jesus like Stephen so that we might spread the joy of knowing Jesus through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.