

Paradigm of Christian Witness: Part 2

A Sermon on Acts 7:54-8:3

Knox @ Faith PCA Tacoma

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Last week we began the story of the first Christian martyr. Acts 6:8-7:53 told us the story of Stephen's fruitful ministry in Jerusalem, his arrest, and his speech to the Jewish council. We spent most of our time last week reflecting on his speech, considering how it models the mindset, the skill, and the focus of Christian witness.

This week we will continue to consider the theme of Christian witness as we finish the story of the first Christian martyr. As we read the passage together, consider how Stephen's suffering and death continue, enhance, underline, and seal the witness of his ministry and of his speech described in the first two scenes of this story.

Acts 7:54-8:3

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Stephen's suffering and death continue to fill out the Paradigm of Christian witness which we began to consider last week.

First, they illustrate the cost of Christian witness. Look again at verse 54 and consider the rejection Stephen endured, "now when they [that is the Jewish council- the official leadership of Israel- scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him." The Greek word translated here as "enraged" literally means something like "hearts torn in two" or "hearts sawn through." It's an expression of anguish. Similarly, the expression "ground their teeth," often translated, "gnashed their teeth" is an expression of intense anger and hostility. Psalm 37:12 describes the wicked as "plotting against the righteous and gnashing their teeth at them," and Jesus describes hell as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Compare this imagery with the description in verse 57 of how these men "cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him," and you get the impression that these supposedly sophisticated, learned leaders of Israel were more like a pack of snarling pit bulls, salivating wolves, or growling lions than a council of pious scholars. Stephen's defense is interrupted, there doesn't appear to be an official verdict, and the Jewish leaders are, by Roman law, supposed to leave capital punishment to Roman authorities anyway, but all of that seems to go out the window in this moment of passion. Stephen's execution resembles a stampede of crazed elephants more than it does an orderly legal proceeding. This is, in essence, a mob lynching.

In addition to this imagery, notice the symbolic expression of rejection in verse 58, where they cast Stephen out of the city before stoning him. While this was partly a matter of practicality, it also likely to have had some symbolic significance as an expression of exile from Jerusalem. In the ancient world exile was often considered to be one of the worst forms of punishment; it was the loss of an identity, one's citizenship, as well as the loss of one's homeland...a social death of sorts. Socrates famously preferred to drink poison rather than be exiled. Think about the symbolism of exile here in this scene: Stephen is cast out of Jerusalem, the city of God, the home of the temple, and the seat of David's ancient throne, the capital God's covenant people.

Another layer of pain in this rejection is that it comes from the official leadership of God's covenant people. Although the apostles are quickly taking over the role of leadership in this transitional moment of redemptive history, at this point the scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees are still, at least in some sense, the official leaders of Israel. Remember that the church in this moment is an infant; she is just beginning to distinguish herself from the nation of Israel. At this moment the church was almost entirely Jewish, worship services were held in the temple courtyards, and there was no New Testament. Of course, at the comfortable distance of 2,000 years, we take it for granted

that the Jewish council here was reprobate and wicked, comprised of the enemies of God's people, rather than the rightful leaders of God's people. But as a Hellenistic Jew, Stephen had probably been raised to think of these men as examples, maybe even heroes.

For these reasons and more, Stephen's rejection was costly.

But it's not just Stephen's rejection that illustrates the cost of Christian witness, it's his death as well. Although his audience was enraged after being compared to those who persecuted the prophets and after being condemned for having uncircumcised hearts and ears, it wasn't until Stephen described his vision of Jesus that they hauled him off to stone him. Notice in verse 57 how they stop their ears and try to drown out his voice in response to the proclamation that Jesus is at the right hand of God. They do this because they rightly understand the implication of Stephen's vision, namely, that Jesus is equal to God, and because they consider such a message to be blasphemy.

According to Mosaic law, stoning (that is, pelting someone to death with rocks) was the punishment for blasphemy. We can only imagine that stoning was not only a slow and painful way to die, but also humiliating. Part of the design behind stoning was that it required the participation of the entire community. As a matter of practicality, it would be challenging, if not impossible, for only one or two men to stone another man to death. But it's not hard to imagine how an entire village of men could stone an adult to death in an hour or two. Unlike our modern, and increasingly, rare, forms of capital punishment, which are so efficient, so private, and so professionalized, the stonings of the Bible were thoroughly communal events. Inflicting shame seems to have been part of the design.

If you've ever read something like the Golden Legend, you know that the church has sometimes tended towards a lurid fascination with the suffering of martyrs. For those of you who haven't read it, the Golden Legend was a popular and influential piece of medieval European piety, which told the stories of saints and martyrs, most of whom suffered horribly gruesome deaths. Many of the stories are so over the top, both in their gory details and in their legendary embellishments, that the work verges on cartoonish. Most of the martyrs seem downright giddy about the prospects of torture and death, and the violence of the book is roughly equivalent to a horror movie.

While such an approach to spiritual formation is unbalanced, unhealthy, and, at times, downright silly, it is not entirely wrongheaded. Certainly there are many flaws and shortcomings with the kind of macabre, superstitious, ascetic approach to spiritual formation found in a book like The Golden Legend. But the story of Stephen's martyrdom does remind us that there is a time and place to count the cost of following Jesus.

In Luke 14:26-28 Jesus exhorts his would-be disciples, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my

disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?”

Here in these verses Jesus reminds us that discipleship is an all-encompassing call: He must be our first allegiance, our highest priority, and our deepest commitment. Loyalty to Jesus must trump every other loyalty, even at the price of our blood.

Stephen’s death illustrates this kind of loyalty, this kind of willingness to pay the price of being a faithful witness. Think about Jesus’ call for a disciple to bear his own cross and look again at the sufferings of Stephen in this passage. Notice with me the many parallels Luke draws in this scene between the sufferings of Stephen and the sufferings of Jesus. Commentators have different ways of counting these up, but by my count there are at least eight parallels in this passage. First, notice that Jesus and Stephen were both charged with blasphemy because both implied that Jesus was equal to God. Secondly notice that both articulated this conviction to the Jewish leadership with the same imagery and phrasing. The sentence which caused the high priest to tear his clothes and declare Jesus a blasphemer was, “from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64). Notice how similar Stephen’s statement is here in Acts 7:56, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” The statements are so similar, in fact, that’s hard not to read Stephen’s vision as being at least a partial fulfilment of Jesus’ prophecy. Thirdly, there is the obvious parallel that both Stephen and Jesus were rejected, condemned, and executed by the leadership of Israel. Fourthly, both were taken outside of the city to be killed. If that doesn’t seem particularly significant to you, then take a look at Hebrews 13:11-13 where the author interprets the location of Jesus’ death as having great theological significance both for the atonement and for our life of discipleship. Fifthly, both accounts make a special mention of garments and disrobing. Jesus was stripped of his garments and the soldiers cast lots for them. Here in verse 58 Luke notes that the executioners disrobe and lay their garments at the feet of Saul. Sixthly, as they are dying, both Jesus and Stephen pray for their spirits to be received. The only significant difference on this point is that, while Jesus addresses his prayer to the Father, Stephen addresses his prayer to Jesus, an implicit affirmation of his divinity. Seventhly, both Jesus and Stephen model a forgiving spirit in their deaths, praying for their executioners to be forgiven. Eighth, both passages single out a witness of the execution who later comes to faith: the Roman centurion immediately after Jesus’ death in Matt 27, and here in Acts 7, Saul the Pharisee who later becomes an apostle.

Clearly, Luke wants us, his readers, to make this connection between the sufferings of Jesus and the sufferings of Christ. Never was Stephen so Christ-like, so thoroughly conformed to his image, than in this moment.

There are at least two major benefits to counting the cost of Christian witness. The first is gratitude. As 21st century Americans, we are very unlikely to suffer martyrdom. And while we may be

living in a time of increasing hostility towards our faith, we are also unlikely to suffer the severe forms of persecution that so many of our ancestors did.

Those are tremendous blessings which we all too easily take for granted. It's good to be reminded that many of our freedoms and spiritual privileges were purchased by the blood, sweat, and tears of faithful Christians who went before us: Ancient Roman Christians who were thrown to the lions paved the way for Constantine to legalize Christianity across the Roman empire; countless missionaries devoting their lives to spreading the gospel across the globe; Reformers like Tyndale or Wycliffe risking their necks to give us the Bible in our native language; Pilgrims and Puritans leaving their homes to work towards a vision of freedom of worship and conscience. Countless generations of ordinary, faithful Christians raising Christian children, planting and maintaining churches, evangelizing their neighbors.

Stephen's martyrdom is a reminder that we stand upon the shoulders of martyrs, prisoners, exiles, outlaws, outcasts, and ordinary servants of Christ who denied themselves so that we might gain Christ.

Gratitude is not merely a warm, fuzzy feeling of appreciation; it's a lifestyle. "To whom much is given, much is required." We are the stewards who have been given 5 talents; what will we have to show for them when our master returns?

But counting the cost should not only produce gratitude, it should also produce resolve. It's not our task to seek out opposition, suffering, or persecution, nor is there any virtue in praying or pining for them. Our task is simply to resolve in advance that we will, by the grace of God, strive to be faithful if and when those things come.

The cost of Christian witness.

Secondly, the reward of Christian witness. If the only emphasis of our text was the cost of Christian witness, we might be tempted to faint in the face of such a calling. But look again with me at verse 55 and notice how it encourages us with a vision of the reward of Christian witness. "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."

Ultimately the reward of Christian witness is Jesus Himself. Being publicly vindicated by him, claimed by Him, dwelling with Him eternally, and hearing Him say to us "well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master." But notice with me here that it is the Holy Spirit who gives Stephen a foretaste of that reward in this moment of crisis. It's no coincidence that the text here juxtaposes the description of Stephen as being filled with the Spirit and his vision of Jesus. Whether or not Jesus visibly appeared in the sky in such a way that anyone who looked up could have seen him is hard to say for sure, but it seems most likely that Jesus only manifested himself to Stephen by the agency of the Holy Spirit. After all, they were probably still indoors at this point.

Along those same lines, consider the description of the heavens being opened. This phrase is used at several other points in Scripture, and it always refers to a moment of divine revelation, usually directly associated with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. At the baptism of Jesus, for example, the heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove onto Jesus, and the Father says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Or, in Revelation 19, when the heavens are opened, John sees a vision of Jesus as warrior, judge, and king.

Throughout the Bible these Spirit-mediated openings of heaven are apocalyptic; that is, they show us how things look from God’s perspective...how things really are. To human eyes in this moment in Acts 7 it may appear that God has forgotten Stephen, that the gospel is doomed to failure, and that the church is helpless and miserable. To put it in terms of this morning’s sermon, from a human perspective, it would have been tempting to think that Jesus had abandoned Stephen, that he had pushed him out to sea in the midst of a raging storm.

But this vision pulls back the veil and shows us what can only be perceived by faith: That Jesus is at the right hand of God, ruling over all things, looking down on us his people with love. He is present with us by His word and spirit, and He is sovereign over all that happens to us.

It is this glorious vision which sustains and encourages us in our witness. It is this glorious vision which gives us hope that one day every wrong will be righted, every good deed rewarded, every tear wiped away.

Look again at this verse and consider the theme of the glory of God. Remember that Stephen opened his speech in 7:2 with a reference to “the God of glory” who appeared to Abraham. Here in verse 55 Stephen’s speech is immediately followed by a vision of the God of glory. Along the same lines, recall how Stephen’s speech was centered on Moses, the man who beheld the backside of God’s glory. Now Stephen is the one beholding God’s glory. Remember that Moses’ face shone after being in the presence of God; here in this moment, it is Stephen’s face that is described as being “like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

This motif of the glory of God and the comparisons between Stephen and Abraham or Stephen and Moses vindicate Stephen and confirm his message of indictment against the Jewish leadership. In this moment Stephen has become another prophet in that long line of prophets that Israel has rejected and persecuted. In that sense we could say that Stephen in this moment is the last point of his sermon: here he is beholding Jesus at God’s right hand- his face glowing like an angel- and they are rushing at him with snarls and shouts, about to drag him away to his death!

But there’s one more detail in this vision that we should consider: the fact that Jesus is standing, rather than sitting, at the right hand of God. Between recent sermons on Acts 2 and Psalm 110, we’ve spent a good deal of time in the past 3 months reflecting on the theological significance of Jesus’ session. But what does it mean that Jesus in this vision is standing at the right hand of God?

Commentators and theologians debate the meaning of this unusual posture. One suggestion is that standing is a sign of honor, similar to a cadet standing when an officer enters the room, or to well-mannered gentleman of a bygone era standing when a woman enters the room. The idea here would be that Jesus is standing to honor Stephen and to receive him into heaven.

The problem with this interpretation is that it doesn't have a strong textual basis to support it.

Another suggestion is that Jesus is standing to advocate for Stephen. Here the idea is that Jesus is standing up to speak on Stephen's behalf before the Father. Oftentimes this interpretation is connected with Luke 12:8-9 where Jesus says, "*And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.*"

While it's true that the language of "Son of Man" here in Luke 12 does connect with Stephen's unusual description of Jesus as the Son of Man here in Acts 7 (*the only NT text which refers to Jesus by this title outside of the gospels*), Luke 12 still does not say anything about Jesus standing.

The most helpful interpretation I have found is that Jesus is standing to judge the Jewish council for their mistreatment of Stephen. Listen to Isaiah 3:13-15, "*The LORD has taken his place to contend; he stands to judge peoples. The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" declares the Lord GOD of hosts.*" Not only do these verses share the posture of standing, they also share the courtroom context of Stephen's trial. Furthermore, this prophecy from Isaiah, like Stephen's sermon, condemns the Jewish leadership of former generations, and it does so in language which Jesus himself used to condemn Israel (the metaphor of a vineyard.) Additionally, the idea of Jesus standing to judge Israel for rejecting Stephen fits well with Jesus' prophetic warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem (for example Matthew 24). You could also make the case that Jesus standing to judge unbelieving Jews fits quite nicely with Stephen's description of Jesus as the "Son of Man," a title which references Daniel's prophecy about one who rides on the clouds and receives an indestructible kingdom.

In other words, if this interpretation is correct, then this vision of Jesus standing at God's right hand isn't so much about honoring Stephen or receiving him to heaven as it is a preview of the Second Coming. It's a picture of Jesus in His kingly role, witnessing the injustice and rebellion of Stephen's opponents, reminding us and assuring Stephen, and us, that he will set everything right when he comes again to judge the earth.

This glorious vision of Jesus is what encourages us in our witness, for it is a preview of the reward we will enjoy in eternity: seeing Jesus face to face. Like a weary runner, who turns the final corner of his course, and looks down the home stretch for the last sprint of his race, and seeing his friends and family cheering him on, finds new strength to finish his course with joy, Stephen in this

moment of rejection, about to be stoned to death, looks up to heaven, and sees his master looking down on him, and remembers that he already ran this same race before him.

The reward of Christian witness.

Lastly, the Fruit of Christian witness.

Even with this glorious vision of Jesus, we might still be tempted to think, “Why did you let this happen lord? It’s great that Stephen won a crown in heaven, but does this serve your church? How does this death advance your cause?” Surely it would have been a temptation for the early church to feel discouraged in this moment: “We’ve lost one of our best! He was cut down in his prime! He had just barely gotten started!”

Well, if you read our text carefully, you’ll find that it hints at three fruits of Stephen’s death.

First, Stephen’s faithful death planted the seeds of Paul’s conversion. Paul explicitly refers to this event in Acts 22:20, and it’s likely that he implicitly refers to it throughout his epistles as he speaks about his former life as a persecutor of the church. Clearly this event made a lasting impression on him. While it didn’t bring him to faith at the time, it was a seed planted in his memory that the Lord watered later. It’s almost certain that Saul not only saw Stephen’s death but also heard his speech, and it’s worth noting Paul in his epistles so heavily emphasizes the theme of God’s people as the temple of God, a theme which is implicit in Stephen’s sermon.

Second, the Lord used Stephen’s faithful death to further the witness of ordinary Christians. Look again at the mention of “Judea and Samaria” in verse 1 and think back to the Ascension. In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells his apostles, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Here in 8:1 Stephen’s death results in a great persecution which causes Christians to scatter throughout “Judea and Samaria.” In other words, Stephen’s death was the catalyst for the church entering phase 2 of Jesus’ marching orders.

If you take a sneak peak at the rest of Acts you’ll see that this scene is one of the major turning points of the book. From here on out the focus begins to shift from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and then to the rest of the Roman empire.

Without Stephen’s death and the ensuing persecution, many of these first Jewish Christians would have stayed in their homes in Jerusalem and the gospel along with them. Stephen’s death was like stepping on the church’s gas pedal.

Thirdly, Stephen’s death, recorded at such length and in such detail in Scripture, left the church with a perpetual example. His witness is our paradigm. He is the martyr par excellence. Only eternity will reveal the full significance of his death: the inspiration and encouragement it has given to generations of Christians.

The church father Tertullian famously said, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Stephen’s death is a reminder to us that we serve a God who brings good out of evil. For that reason we can be confident that, whatever pain we may endure as a faithful witness for Christ, He will turn it to our eternal good and His glory. Amen?