

February 23, 2020

FAITHFULNESS UNTO DEATH

Acts 6:8-7:60

(5 of 17 in a series through Acts)

“I just don’t understand why God would do this.” That’s a sentence we’ve no doubt heard from people in our lives. It may well be a statement we have uttered ourselves. And in one sense, it may be nothing more than an honest admission that we can’t see the big picture. We don’t understand how our child’s sickness or our own job loss or a friend’s auto accident that’s left him disabled is working together for that person’s good and glorifying the Lord. We just don’t see it, and we’re simply acknowledging that. But at another level, when we say, “I just don’t understand why God would do this,” we may be demonstrating the need to remind ourselves of some basic realities of who God is, who we are, and what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus. And there’s no better place to see these realities than in a text that deals with martyrdom, and specifically we’re looking at the first martyr of the church as we look at Acts 6:8-7:60 this morning.

And as we look at this painful yet hopeful story in these verses, my hope is that we’ll find ourselves growing in our understanding of our role and purpose in God’s redemptive plan as well as finding a deeper trust and security in the God who loves us and sent his Son to die for us. Let’s first, then, simply acquaint ourselves with the story that is told in Acts 6:8-7:60, and then we’ll see what themes and lessons that we need to recognize in these verses.

The text begins by focusing on one of the seven men who had been appointed in the task of overseeing the food distribution for widows in the church, namely, Stephen. And we’re told that Stephen was “full of grace and power” and “was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8), when he came into contact with some who were against him but couldn’t match the wisdom with which he was speaking, and so they decided to falsely accuse him, getting false witnesses to say that he speaks against Moses, the temple, and the law. Stephen then makes his defense, but it really isn’t so much a defense as much as a hard-hitting sermon. In 7:1-53, we read of Stephen’s sermon, wherein he walks through Israel’s history—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and the tabernacle and temple—and provides his own accusation against his accusers. And, finally, in 7:54-60, we read that Stephen is executed by stoning, becoming the first martyr of the church. What then do we need to see in this glimpse into the life and death of Stephen? I’ll highlight a few things. First, the Lord has ordained that his people will face opposition.

The Lord has ordained that his people will face opposition

At this point in Acts it can feel like everything is going smoothly—well, more smoothly than we might have expected. Sure, they’ve been imprisoned and beaten, so I don’t want to make light of the persecution they’ve seen. But at every point, it seems that they’ve come out well on the other side. Even after they were beaten, they had been able to walk out of the hearing with the

temple leaders “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for [Christ’s] name” (5:41).

Therefore, as we begin our text in 6:8, you’re almost programmed to think they’ll escape whatever threat comes their way. And perhaps your anticipation is even heightened to that end as we read of Stephen being “full of grace and power . . . doing great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). But the story of Stephen doesn’t end with him walking out from a threatening encounter, rejoicing that he has been worthy to suffer dishonor like the early disciples had been able to. This story will end with the people picking up stones and hurling them at him until they kill him.

So I just want to use this opportunity to remind us that the Lord has ordained that his people will face opposition. It’s actually part of his plan. When he calls us to him, he tells us to take up our cross—which is a way of saying, “Be willing to walk to your death.” And when the souls of the martyrs before the throne ask in Revelation 6:10 how long until the Lord comes to bring justice on the earth, they are told to rest a little longer until the full number of martyrs would be complete. That is, they were told to rest until the number of believers ordained by the Lord to die for his sake were martyred. This is simply part of God’s plan.

In 1553 there were five men who had been imprisoned in Lyons, France, awaiting execution for preaching the gospel. They’d been corresponding with John Calvin, who was working to find a way to see them spared. But by May it became clear that Calvin could do no more, and the men were indeed going to be killed. So Calvin wrote to them, “Now, at this present hour, necessity itself exhorts you more than ever to turn your whole mind heavenward. As yet, we know not what will be the event. But since it appears as though God would use your blood to sign his truth, there is nothing better than for you to prepare yourselves to that end, beseeching him so to subdue you to his good pleasure, that nothing may hinder you from following whithersoever he shall call. . . . Even so, my brothers, be confident that you shall be strengthened, according to your need, by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus, so that you shall not faint under the load of temptations, however heavy it be, any more than he did who won so glorious a victory. . . . Since it pleases him to employ you to the death . . . he will strengthen your hands in the fight, and will not suffer a single drop of your blood to be spent in vain.”¹

“Use your blood to sign his truth.” “Employ you to the death.” This is not language that reflects merely the harsh times of the middle of the 16th century. This is language that reflects biblical teaching. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” And it was Jesus himself who said to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:10, “Be faithful unto death.” This is the call of the believer—to follow the Lord wherever he leads us. And he has assured us that he had ordained that we will see opposition in this life.

¹John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*. Volume 5. Jules Bonnett, ed. David Constable, Trans. Reprint. (Still Waters Revival Books: Edmonton, AB, Canada, 2000), 404-06.

But this is not some admission of defeat. Far from it, actually, as our second truth is that we must bear witness to the truth (even in the midst of opposition).

We must bear witness to the truth (even in the midst of opposition)

In the midst of facing malicious opposition, Stephen does not cower. He does not stay silent. Rather, he preaches an indicting sermon that Luke records for us over fifty-three verses (7:1-53). Now, the sermon can be a bit confusing because he's speaking to fellow Jews, and it looks like he simply walks through Israel's history (which they would have known well). So, you have Abraham (vv. 2-8), Joseph (vv. 9-16), Moses (vv. 17-43), and then David, Solomon, the tabernacle, and the temple (vv. 44-50). Why a history lesson for a people who would have known these details so well? It would be like me starting the sermon by saying, "About forty-five minutes ago we began our service with a reading from Isaiah 40, followed by singing 'Behold Our God' and on and on." You'd be thinking, "I know. Why are you telling us what we already know?"

But Stephen's sermon is not a history lesson. He's being selective—he says nothing about the period of the judges—and he's got some points to make. For example, the accusation against him voiced in 6:13 is, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place." In other words, Stephen's accusers are presenting themselves as loving the temple and the holy land on which it sat, while accusing Stephen of holding no such regard. But why love the temple? Well, someone would respond, "You love the temple because that's where God is." So, notice what Stephen does in his sermon. He tells Israel's history by noting how many times and ways God is present and working outside the temple and outside of Jerusalem.

He notes that God appeared to Abraham "when he was in Mesopotamia" (7:2), God removed him *from Haran* into the land of Israel (7:4). Then, he quotes Exodus 3:12, where God tells Moses that he'll redeem the people *out of Egypt* and bring them *into the wilderness* where they will worship him (7:7). And even when Abraham had no inheritance in the land—"not even a foot's length" (7:5)—God was still making promises of land and offspring. Why? Because God's work and activity isn't limited to the land and the temple.

This theme continues as he speaks of God's work in Joseph's life and with Moses. In these instances, God is working in miraculous ways in Egypt. And ultimately, he appears to Moses and says to him, "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt" (7:33-34). Do you see? The temple isn't some sacred space that limits God's work. The ground wherever he appears is holy, and he's hearing and seeing his people even though they're in Egypt.

And I could continue to show this theme, but I need to look at others. Therefore, I'll end it by noting that Stephen ends his sermon in 7:49-50 by quoting from Isaiah 66:1-2 in which God says,

“Heaven is my throne, and 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?” In other words, Stephen’s not making some crazy observation about God not being limited in his presence or work to the temple; this was the very point God had made repeatedly in the Scriptures. Their made up accusation that Stephen was slandering the temple was ironic because they are the ones who’d failed to understand that God was always greater than and never limited to the temple. In fact, God himself had come to them in the person of the Son, and they were more fixated on that structure than on the Lord himself.

But there’s another theme Stephen develops in his more-than-a-retelling-of-Israel’s-history sermon. He also shows that there have always been a people who rejected God’s appointed deliverers. Right after his section with Abraham, he moves on to Joseph, and he illustrates that this narrative develops a theme of rejecting God’s divinely appointed deliverers. After all, that’s who Joseph was, wasn’t he? He was the one God had appointed to sustain and provide for the Israelites during the time of famine. So, how did his fellow Israelites treat him? Stephen notes, “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; [and now more of theme of the temple not limiting God, he continues] but God was with him” (7:9).

But, someone could say, the rejection of Joseph by the patriarchs was exceptional. Well, then look at Moses. Moses was spared from murder as a baby, and God raised him up as an Israelite living in Egypt during the years of slavery. And one day Moses killed an Egyptian who was mistreating an Israelite, and then he fled. Now, the book of Exodus seems to suggest that the main motivation for Moses leaving Egypt was his fear of Pharaoh, once one of the Israelites noted that it was known what Moses had done. But look at the detail Stephen adds in 7:25. He says, “He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.” In other words, even the Israelite slaves rejected their God-appointed deliverer in Moses (initially), which was surprising even to Moses.

Then, even after the delivery out of Egyptian slavery under the leadership of Moses, Stephen mentions, “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt” and made false gods (7:30). Then Stephen quotes from Amos 5:25-27, in which God says, “Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.”

In this text, the Lord is noting that even if the Israelites in the wilderness made their sacrifices, it wasn’t a reflection of their hearts. They were actually worshiping false gods and walking in idolatry. And interestingly, Stephen alters the last two words of the quote from Amos. Originally the quote ended with the words “beyond Damascus,” but Stephen changes it to “beyond Babylon.” He’s doing this because he’s speaking to a group of Israelites who live on this side of Babylonian exile. But he’s saying, “Just as the group that went into exile in Babylon were rebellious idolaters, so you—now beyond Babylon—are also rebellious idolaters.”

In other words, there have been a long line of unbelieving Israelites who didn't understand God or his ways and rejected his appointed deliverers, and now, Stephen is saying, "You're continuing that pattern." Specifically he says, "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" (7:51-53). This is an indicting sermon, isn't it? And they hate him for it, and they're going to kill him. But I just want to note this—this is playing out according to God's plan, and Stephen is acting in line with the commission Christ had given his church.

In other words, just as God has ordained that his people will face opposition, he has also commanded that his people keep bearing witness to the truth—even in the midst of that opposition. That is, God doesn't say to us that he wants us to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey all that Jesus commands *unless we face opposition*. No, he expects us to obey his commands, *having ordained that we will face opposition*. It's all part of his plan. Later in the book of Acts we're going to see a prophecy that Paul will suffer in Jerusalem, and so the people plead with him not to go. But Paul will answer, "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).

God doesn't tell to obey his commands *unless we encounter difficulty*. He doesn't command us to store up treasure in heaven *unless finances or tight or there are some earthly treasures we really want*. He doesn't tell us to gather with the saints *unless it's a particularly harsh and brutal winter*. He doesn't tell us to be anxious for nothing *unless we have personalities that make us feel at unease unless things feel like they're in our control*. He tells us to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him. He tells us to keep bearing witness to his truth as he reminds us that he's sending us out as sheep in the midst of wolves—and I don't think you have to watch any nature show to know that's a gruesome picture. What happens in Acts 7 is all part of God's plan and call to his church, and you and I are brothers, sisters, and co-laborers with Stephen and all like him. And this brings me to my third point: The Lord spends our lives for his glory.

The Lord spends our lives for his glory

I've mentioned that Stephen's death was part of God's plan. Again, Jesus' word to the martyrs in heaven is that he's not coming back until the full number of brothers and sisters in Christ whom he has appointed to shed his blood for his name have indeed shed their blood. And Stephen's death is a painful reality. After Stephen preaches, Luke tells us, "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. . . . Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (7:54, 58).

Now the observation here is that because we've been purchased by the blood of Christ, he owns us. We are his. And he can spend our lives any way he wants, to glorify himself and fulfill his glorious purposes. When Calvin wrote to those prisoners in Lyons, telling them that it seemed that the Lord was going to "employ [them] to the death," his language is fitting. We belong to

Christ, and can employ or spend our lives any way he wants. But I promise you this, he will not allow anything in your life to happen in vain. Your cancer won't be in vain. Your loneliness won't be in vain. Your heartache won't be in vain. And not one drop of blood you shed will be in vain.

As Stephen is being killed, and it looks like the enemy is winning, the “witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58). Now, we know what happens with this young man. If you don't, just wait a few Sundays. No, I'll tell you now. This young man became the greatest missionary that the church has ever seen, as he became the missionary to the Gentiles. In fact, if those stoning Stephen had known what would happen with that young man witnessing Stephen's death that day, they probably would have just left Stephen alone. God can employ or spend our lives in any way that he wants, and he'll always be doing more in and through us than we can see.

But I want to make one last point: The Lord loves his people and will gather them to himself.

The Lord loves his people and will gather them to himself

If this sermon were the only thing about Christ you'd ever heard in your life, you might get the impression that he employs his people to his service but maybe doesn't care about them. But you couldn't be further from the truth. We're talking about the one who lived, died, and was raised for us, after all. But we also see his love for his people at the end of Acts 7.

As Luke records Stephen's death, he first tells us that the Lord let Stephen get a glimpse of heaven as he was dying. Here's what he writes: “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. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (7:55-56).

Now, what's interesting about this is that the book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as being seated at the right hand of God because his priestly work is finished. But Stephen sees him standing. And it seems that commentators suggest one of two reasons, both of which aim at the same thing. One suggestion is that Jesus is taking note of the evil and readying himself for judgment. In other words, the one who reigns, to whom Stephen has testified, is showing that he's ready to come in judgment, and so those who reject him are in trouble. The other reason suggested is that Jesus is standing because he's ready to receive his first martyr, Stephen, whom he loves.

The reality is, though, that both suggestions aim at the same thing. The Lord judges his enemies because he is saving his people, and he welcomes his people because he has saved them. Both realities simply affirm Jesus' love for his people. In other words, our lives belong to Christ, who can employ them in whatever way he sees fit—even to death. But at our deaths, there will be no regret on our behalf because the one who loves us and gave himself for us will receive us unto himself, so that where he is there we may be also. And, to paraphrase Jim Elliott, our lives are a mere giving up of what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose.

May we then this morning, understanding that the call of our lives is to obey in the face of opposition, fix our eyes on the one who will one day welcome us into his kingdom, and pour out our lives as a living sacrifice of obedience to him. May we demonstrate that as our response as we come to the table. Amen.