

Acts

Part 20 – The Death of Stephen

Acts 7:54-8:1

Exegetical Outline:

- I. Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin (7:1-53)
 - A. God and Abraham (7:2-8)
 - B. God and Joseph (7:9-16)
 - C. God and Moses (7:17-43)
 - D. God, the Tabernacle, and the Temple (7:44-50)
 - 1. Israel worshipped God in the tabernacle (7:44-45)
 - 2. David, Solomon, and the temple (7:46-47)
 - 3. God, the tabernacle and the temple (7:48-50)
 - E. Indictment of the Jewish people for rejecting Jesus (7:51-53)
 - 1. They are stubborn (7:51a)
 - 2. Their hearts and ears are unclean (7:51b).
 - 3. They oppose God (7:51b-e).
 - 4. They persecuted the prophets (7:52a)
 - 5. They killed the Messiah (7:52b)
 - 6. They know the law but do not keep it (7:53)

II. The Death of Stephen (7:54-8:1)

- A. Response of the Sanhedrin (7:54)
- B. Stephen's vision (7:55)
- B. Jesus' true status (7:56)
- C. The Stoning of Stephen (57-60)
- D. Saul's approval of the stoning (8:1)



Main Idea: Followers of Jesus will experience danger but not without ultimate hope.

1. Rage

Vs. 54 – “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.”

- The text literally reads that they were “sawn through in their hearts.” So great was their rage that they ground their teeth in anger and frustration. This unrestrained rage was behind the men’s ignoring of Roman law that executions could not be carried out apart from due legal process and permission.

2. Disciple

Throughout this episode Stephen exemplifies what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Having sat faithfully under the teaching of the apostles Stephen had deep knowledge of God’s Word. He was a servant. He gave public witness to the gospel. And Stephen was willing to be persecuted.

Note some of the connections between Stephen and our Lord:

- Stephen makes a bold confession before the Sanhedrin (7:56) as Jesus did (Lk 22:69).
- Stephen commends his spirit to God as Jesus did (Lk 23:46).
- He prays for his murderers as did Jesus (Lk 23:34).

3. Vindication

Vs. 56 – And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

- Stephen is given a vision of Jesus in the courts of Heaven. Similar visions were granted to some of the prophets and later to the apostle John. The vision Stephen receives is that of Jesus’ divine and exalted status.
- “Son of Man” – Daniel 7

4. Advocate

Vs. 56

- There is something unique about Stephen’s vision in that he saw “the Son of Man **standing**...” That the writer of Hebrews describes the ascended Christ as seated at the right hand of majesty (8:1; 12:2) signifies both his authority and the completion of his atoning work. It may be that the Jesus is portrayed as standing because that was the posture of witnesses in legal proceedings. The Sanhedrin presented false witnesses against Stephen. But now the Son of Man stands as Stephen’s heavenly Advocate.

5. Love

Vs. 60a – “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’ ...”

- Stephen does not simply pronounce his killers forgiven. They are, after all, unrepentant. Rather, he asks the Lord to forgive them (“do not hold this sin against them.”) As one who understood that forgiveness was the fruit of repentance, Stephen is, in essence, praying that the Lord would grant his murderers repentance. Stephen dies loving his enemies.

6. Hope

7:59-8:1 – “And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep. 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.”

a) Jesus has defeated death. (7:59-60b)

Luke uses the term “fell asleep” to describe Stephen’s death. While a not uncommon colloquialism, it is nevertheless important because the Bible is not shy about the painful reality of death. Death is the last enemy. It is not something that is either good or natural. And yet Jesus has removed the sting of death. He has stripped the grave of its victory. So for Stephen, as for all of God’s people, death is as threatening as a good night’s sleep.

b) Jesus saves the lost cause. (8:1a)

The inclusion of Saul (soon to become Paul) is resounding in its hopefulness. This man who gave hearty approval to the stoning of Stephen and would, from this point, ratchet up the persecution of the church would himself be snatched out of his stubborn rebellion and become the church’s greatest apostle.

c) Jesus redeems our suffering. (8:1b-c)

Stephen’s execution and the increasing persecution that quickly followed served to advance the gospel beyond Jerusalem throughout Judea and even into Samaria. This is a theme that will be repeated in Acts as God redeems the suffering of His people for the sake of the gospel.