

DATE: September 7, 2008

TEXT: Acts 7:51-8:3

TITLE: "Stephen II"



I am continuing this morning with a sermon series I began last week. We are looking at the life of Stephen. Last week we looked at Stephen and saw a great man of God. This week we are going to look at the final message and the final moments of Stephen's life. We will see five lessons this morning.

**Lesson # 1** Tradition alone is insufficient to produce a righteous life. READ Acts 7: 51-53

**You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."**

Throughout chapter 7 of Acts Stephen is talking to the Sanhedrin and is retelling the history of Israel. Again and again in these verse Stephen uses the term "Our fathers". In verse 51 he switches and uses the term "your fathers". In summary this is the message of Stephen. He is saying "you are just like your forefathers... they rejected God's messengers, and you reject the messiah." I think you can see why they were so angry at Stephen. He confronted their sins.

It is important to understand that Stephen was speaking to the most religious men on his day and age. They went to worship every single day. They were careful to keep the laws of Moses. They could point to their fathers and grandfathers who had been high officials in the Temple. And Stephen says "You stiff-necked people, don't you realize that your tradition will never bring righteousness... tradition alone will only bring damnation just as it did to your forefathers."

This is a truth that is critically important to hear in this day and age. Some of you are sitting in the same sanctuary that your parents sat in...or your grandparents, or your great grand parents and I don't know how many generations to go back. The tradition of this church is rich and long and is a great blessing that we have as a church..... but tradition saves no one. The faith of parents is not inherited by the children.

The tradition of loyal church attendance, in and of itself, does not bring salvation. As a matter of fact, tradition can be a great tool of Satan to blind people to the truth of Jesus Christ. Satan can use tradition as a false alternative to relationship with Christ. Stephen's primary message is a condemnation of tradition without Jesus.

**Lesson # 2** When confronted with truth, religionists often react in anger. READ verse 54

**“When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.”** King James states they were "cut to the heart".

You can almost picture these 70 men grinding their teeth at Stephen and almost growling at him in anger.

We live in a time when truth is not always appreciated. My wife deals with this reality fairly often in her job. She will send home a poor work notice with one of her students. It will say something like "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jones, your son got a 45 on his last Spanish exam and he is currently averaging 50 in the class." Often parents will then call Kim; and Kim will explain that their child was very capable of doing the work, but that the child was lazy and if you are lazy in a language...you will fail. Nine times out of ten the parent will be very gracious and helpful and ask what can be done to change the situation... but every once in a while you will get a parent who reacts with anger "What do you mean my child is lazy."

The truth is not always well received. When we try to tell a person that their lifestyle is not

pleasing to God... we often receive anger. When we tell someone that they need a personal relationship with Christ and not just a religion of habit, the reaction is often anger. Stephen received anger when he spoke the truth.

**Lesson # 3** When death is near our Lord offers courage, love and his strength, not necessarily escape. READ verse 55-60.

**55**But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56**"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." **57**At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, **58**dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59**While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **60**Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

The lesson is this...Christians die. Christians, at times die difficult deaths from cancer. Christians, at times, die very young. Christians at times die unexpectedly. God rarely intervenes to prevent death.....but God does give courage, strength, and His presence.

I have conducted many funerals. I have conducted funerals for people who were strong in their faith and mature in their relationship with the Lord, and I have conducted too many funerals of people who were not strong believers and not mature in faith. The difference is amazing. Funerals

for strong believers are full of hope, full of peace and full of the power of the Holy Spirit. Funerals for people not active in faith are full of uncertainty and doubt. There is grief and mourning at all funerals....but God promises his presence and his eternity to his children.

The final words of John Wesley were **"the best of all is, God is with me."**

**Lesson # 4** Stephen sees our Lord arise, stand, and welcome him. READ verse 56

**"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."**

This is one of the most magnificent pictures in all of scripture. Scripture tells us, and the Apostles Creed affirms, that Jesus ascended to heaven and **"sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty."** Jesus ascended to the judgment seat.

What Stephen sees is Jesus arise out of the judgment seat and stand in the place of the defense attorney...the Advocate.

*1 John 2:1* states this truth

**My dear Children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our Defense--Jesus Christ.**

Jesus Christ is our advocate. Jesus Christ stands to welcome his sons and his daughters.

What a joy that should bring to each and every one of us.

Over the years there have been a number of famous trials. The O.J. Simpson trial being one of the most famous. One of the criticisms that has been heard was that the reason O.J. was acquitted was because he could buy the defense "dream team".

When we stand before our heavenly Father we will not have a team of lawyers at our side.... we will only have Jesus Christ. And we will not be acquitted... that's impossible, we are all guilty, no... we will be forgiven based on the sacrificial payment of Christ on the cross. Praise be to God.

**Finally, Lesson # 5** Notice the reason for Stephen's death. READ Acts 8:1-3

**1And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.**

Stephen's death had a purpose. The great truth of *Romans 8:28* states...

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.**

The good that came out of Stephen's death was two-fold. **First**, up to this time Christianity

was slowly spreading throughout the city of Jerusalem. There were a few thousand Christians all within the Jerusalem area. But after Stephen's death, because of the persecution, the followers of Christ were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and everywhere they went, they took with them the message of Christ.

**Second**, This was the beginning of the journey of Saul who latter became Paul. Paul eventually took the message of Christ throughout the world.

What we see in the death of Stephen was the genesis, the beginning, of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. As a result of Stephen's death we see the fulfillment of *Acts 1:8*. It states...

**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

I am reminded of the words of Joseph as he was speaking to his brothers. He said "**What you intended for evil, God intend for good.**"

This morning we have seen the great lessons from Stephen. We have seen **first**, that tradition alone will not save us.

**Second**, we have seen that truth is often resented and met with anger.

**Third,** we have seen that when death is near, the Lord gives strength and comfort.

**Fourth,** We saw the wonderful truth that our Lord is our Advocate and greets us when we stand in the Presence of the Father.

**Finally,** we saw that all things do work for good for those who follow our Lord Jesus

AMEN