

INTRODUCTION

These verses record for us the last moments of Stephen's life. He was to pay for his boldness with his own life. It is a dramatic and moving passage and although Stephen was killed he was not the victim but the victor. Death merely ushered Stephen into the presence of the Lord. Most of the murdering crowd would perish eternally although Saul is the exception.

I want to make a contrast between the Sanhedrin who were intent on murder and Stephen who was intent on glorying God in this situation

1. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN BEING FILLED WITH ANGER OR WITH THE SPIRIT (vs. 54-55).

The Sanhedrin no doubt listened to the earlier part of Stephen's speech with agreement and interest (7:1-50). After all he was merely reciting the nation's history, a topic that they loved to speak about. But as Stephen's application began to hit home no doubt these religious leaders became increasingly uncomfortable and they became furious when they heard his very bold attack upon them in verses 51-53. The Greek word, which is translated "furious" (v 54) means to "saw in half" and is sometimes translated "cut to the heart." It is clear that the Sanhedrin were cut in two by Stephen's words, the veneer of their false spirituality was exposed, their formalism was shown to be a sham so it is no wonder that they were furious.

Instead of repenting of their sin they became angry, because as I said last week unbelief is very stubborn indeed. They were enraged and frustrated at Stephen as the phrase "gnashed their teeth" clearly shows (v 54 cf. Luke 13:28).

Stephen's hearers are resistant and callous towards the truth as presented to them, their hearts were so hard that they were enraged when faced with their sin of stubbornness and resistance. But that is how unbelief is. It becomes enraged when faced with sin and the consequences of sin.

Now the Sanhedrin had heard the truth, they had heard Jesus' teaching and witnessed his miracles. They also had heard the preaching of the apostles and seen the miracles that were performed. Yet they refused to face up to the reality of their sin and instead gnashed their teeth at Stephen. That is sadly what most of this group of people are doing today in hell for Jesus repeatedly describes hell as a place where there is gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:41-42).

You see at least part of the suffering in hell will be the endless anger and frustration of unrepentant sinners who will forever feel the intense conviction of their damning sin and anger towards God. People who reject God's grace and love do not feel remorse under the eternal judgement of God in fact that will only make them angrier.

However in sharp contrast to the Sanhedrin Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (v 55). In the midst of the storm of anger that blew around him, Stephen remained calm and totally under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Now being constantly filled with the Holy Spirit was a way of life for Stephen (6:5 & 8) therefore he didn't have to make any adjustments in his life when a crisis came or in this case when his time to face death came upon him. Now the work of the Spirit in a believer's life produces the fruit of godly living but He also provides special grace and strength at times of crisis and this is what happens to Stephen and this is what Jesus clearly taught his apostles (Luke 12:11-12). The Holy Spirit grants grace to persecuted believers enabling them to glorify God even in their death (1 Peter 4:14). Stephen was an example for countless thousands of Christian martyrs whose deaths have confirmed this wonderful truth.

Therefore as Christians we must not shy away from difficult situations in the knowledge that when we are weak then we are strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). We must boldly communicate Christ in all circumstances knowing that the Holy Spirit will grant us the grace to face the consequences and to do so with joy and peace in our hearts no matter what those consequences may be.

2. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS AND SPIRITUAL SIGHT (vs. 55-57)

Now in the midst of this very difficult situation Stephen looked into heaven presumable he was looking for Jesus, as he knew that is where he went (Acts 1:10-11). What God allowed him to see was the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Stephen is one of only a few people who are permitted a glimpse into heaven along with Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-30) Ezekiel (1:26-28) Paul (1 Corinthians 12:2-4) and John (Revelation 4). God opened Stephen's eyes to see the glory of God the Father and there beside Him was His Son Jesus Christ. Now it is interesting that elsewhere in Scripture Jesus is described as seated at the right hand of His Father, and the idea of being seated is that his work of redemption is complete his work of salvation is over (Hebrews 10:12).

However Stephen sees Jesus standing which must show his concern for Stephen and perhaps the idea is also one of Jesus standing waiting to welcome Stephen into his heavenly home.

Now it is a very comforting thought that Jesus our Saviour is concerned for his people when they go through times of trial and difficulty. He knows all about our trials he sees what no one else sees and he knows what no one else knows. You can guarantee that if Jesus is concerned then he is also willing to help, willing to give us that needed grace to cope and to remain faithful to him.

But it is equally comforting to know that when that moment comes for us to leave this world that our Jesus will be ready to greet us and welcome us into his home. It is always nice when we go to someone's home and are given a very warm welcome, a welcome that is genuine. Well one day if you are a Christian you will be made to feel very welcome; you will feel very much at home in your Father's house and His Son will be there to welcome you. After all is He not the one who gave his life to redeem you? No wonder He is concerned for us and no wonder He will welcome us into his heavenly home.

There will be no chance of being turned away if you are a Christian and no chance of not being made welcome. He has died for us and all that Christ has died for will be made welcome.

So overcome was Stephen with his vision that he burst out with the words of verse 56. For the Sanhedrin such a statement was the final straw for them, their tolerance for Stephen who they considered a blasphemer was exhausted. Perhaps Stephen's use of the words "Son of man" provoked them further for they must have remembered that that was a title that Jesus used of himself (Matthew 26:63-64) at his trial.

They had Jesus put to death now they are prepared to put all associated with him to death. Jesus claimed to be the Son of man who would sit at God's right hand and now Stephen's vision and words' describing what he saw clearly supports the words of Jesus. The Sanhedrin is left with only two choices. They must either execute Stephen as they did with Jesus or admit that they were wrong to have had Jesus killed. They are not about to do the latter, for they are far too proud to do that so they choose to silence Stephen by killing him.

The contrast again is very clear the Sanhedrin covered their ears and yelled at the top of their voices. They had heard enough they did not want to hear anymore; and so they rushed at Stephen like a herd of cattle in order to have him killed. These were supposed to be the leaders of the Jewish people but they were blinded to the truth.

They continued in the tradition of their forefathers as Stephen showed in his defence by rejecting God's messenger. But not only did they reject him they had him killed therefore it is not surprising that they should reject and kill one of God's faithful servants. It is interesting that the word for "rushed" vividly portrays the Sanhedrin's fury.

It is the word used to describe the mad stampede of the herd of pigs in Mark 5:13 and it is used in Acts 19:29 to describe the frenzied mob that stampeded into the theatre at Ephesus. We might say today that they totally lost it, they lost their cool and therefore throwing aside their dignity the highest court among the Jews were reduced to murderous madness and mob rule.

Unbelief is never neutral; it is hostile towards Christ and His gospel. If you are an unbeliever today then you are hostile towards Christ and are capable of the very sin that these religious leaders committed. Christians today are being persecuted in our world simply because they believe in Jesus Christ but that should not surprise us as we see here, for unbelief will go to any lengths rather than submit to Jesus Christ.

Christian do not expect the unbelieving world to treat you well, do not be surprised by the hostility of sinners, they did not treat Christ well, they did not treat Stephen well and they will not treat us well.

If you are not a Christian but would like to trust in Christ then think this through for to do so means being hated by the world, it will mean facing the hostility of the world, but remember Christ is concerned for his people and will one day welcome each one of his people into his heavenly home.

3. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN DEATH AND LIFE (vs. 58-59)

There is no agreement by biblical scholars as to whether Stephen was slaughtered by mob violence or whether he was legally executed. The Sanhedrin had tried Stephen but the Sanhedrin had no power to put anybody to death (John 18:31). But yet Stephen was executed by stoning and not by a Roman form of execution.

Therefore I think the likelihood is that Stephen was killed by mob violence rather than by a clear directive to have him executed. However the details of Stephen's death show us that at least the Sanhedrin attempted to hold on to some form of legality. They did not stone Stephen for example until he was dragged out of the city no doubt that was because of the injunction in Leviticus 24:14.

Furthermore stoning was the punishment for blasphemy according to Leviticus 24:16 so at least they attempted to execute him by what they considered the proper means.

Before they started stoning Stephen the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of Saul and once again this is in keeping with Scripture for Deuteronomy 17:7 commanded the witnesses to be the first to throw stones at the accused. In spite of their anger the Sanhedrin tried to give Stephen's death the appearance of formal justice.

As death approached for Stephen he prayed "Lord Jesus receive my spirit" and his cry echoed that our Lord on the cross (Luke 23:46), except that Stephen calls out to Jesus and Jesus called out to his Father. Stephen's prayer clearly indicates that he expected to enter into God's presence he expected to be accepted by Jesus.

The bible is very clear that when that moment of death comes for the believer there is no delay between this life and the life to come. There is no such place as purgatory where the dead are kept but believers immediately enter into the presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Of course

Stephens's confident prayer was answered for upon his death he was ushered immediately into the presence of the Lord.

Now although the contrast is between physical life and death, there is a spiritual contrast. The one who was physically dying (Stephen) was the one who had spiritual life and the ones who were physical alive (Sanhedrin) were in fact spiritually dead. The ones who thought they were acting on God's behalf were in fact acting against him and one that the Sanhedrin though was opposing God was the one who would be welcomed into God's presence. The ones who thought they were acceptable to God were in fact rejecting Him and the one that the Sanhedrin thought was unacceptable to God was the very one that Jesus stood waiting on to enter His home. You see how easy it is to get things wrong.

Perhaps there is someone here who thinks that you are acceptable to God, you are religious and full of good works but could it be that you are unacceptable to God because of your sin and your refusal to repent of it. It is only those who know that they are unacceptable to God and as a result turn to God in repentance and faith that are made acceptable through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today in this building there is this contrast between life and death, between those who are spiritually alive and those who are spiritually dead. Are you spiritually alive like Stephen even though he died or are you spiritually dead like the Sanhedrin even though they were physically alive?

4. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN HATE AND LOVE (vs. 60-8:1)

The final contrast that I will us to think about is the one between hate and love. The mob poured out their wrath on Stephen by stoning him without showing mercy but Stephen's heart by contrast was filled with love for his opponents. Amid the flying stones, Stephen fell on his knees and cried out with a loud voice "Lord do not hold this sin against them!"

This of course reminds us of the Lord Jesus who said something very similar when facing his own death (Luke 23:34). Stephen was pleading for God's forgiveness on behalf of his executioners. He was in effect praying for their repentance and for their salvation since that is the only way that God is able to forgive anyone. How is it possible to be able to love our enemies like Stephen?

The answer is found in the fact that God has poured his love into our hearts and it's from this resource that we are able to love our enemies just as Christ did (Romans 5:5). We are unable to love our enemies on our own strength; natural worldly love will never be able to do that but God's love poured into our hearts enables us to love the most hostile person.

That is what Jesus did on the cross and that is what God did to those of us who are Christians. Once we were his enemy, hostile to Christ (Romans 5:10) but God loved us in the midst of our hostility and died for us in order to forgive and reconcile us to himself. So if God through Christ could do that for us and we are to be like Christ then we must ask for God's help to enable us to use his resources to love even those who oppose us and hate us.

Then Stephen died it is called "falling asleep" (v 60) here for that is a lovely description of death for the believer. Sleep is painless and temporary and it takes us from the experience of weariness, work and consciousness of all the problems of life to the freshness of a new day. That is what death does for the believer. The process of death may be extremely painful but death itself for the Christian is painless.

It is of course temporary for we wake in Christ's presence and one day our bodies will be resurrected and be united to our souls and with this resurrection body we will live on God's new heaven and earth for all eternity. But death also moves us to being conscious of all our trials and

troubles in this world to our New World were we will be free from all those distressing and difficult things.

Now this section finishes with a little footnote (8:1). We are reminded that Saul was present throughout this ordeal giving his approval to all that was going on. Paul as he becomes known confesses that he was the worst of sinners with a murderous heart towards all believers in Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 1:13-15).

That murderous intent and hate is obvious here but Stephen's preaching and his calm manner and love for his opponents must have left an impact upon Saul and in time as we will see God takes a murderous heartless man and makes him into the compassionate Apostle Paul. Only God can do that and through this man Paul God penetrated the Roman Gentile world and as a result altered the course of history.

God heard the prayer of Stephen as he is being killed and at least one person (Saul) is forgiven for his sin and is given life and as a result Christianity would continue to spread throughout the world and incredibly it would be spread by one of its fiercest opponents.

That is what God can do when his people love and pray for sinners. Let us pray that God will enable us to love sinners like Stephen did and like Christ did. That will lead us into praying for them, and trusting that God will save sinners even the worst of sinners within our family and within our community.

Amen