
Finish Well

(Acts 7:54-8:1a)

Introduction

1. Theme: Jesus accelerates us by the Holy Spirit to grow deeper through His family, wider in our impact for the gospel.
2. How we face death says a lot about how we view life: What's really of value, priority, importance.
 - a. It reveals how you will really respond in words, attitudes, actions, choices when tested by pain & suffering.
 - b. It reveals how much we've yielded ourselves and our lives to Jesus.
 - c. Through Stephen's real life & death story, we can learn how to finish well.
3. Background
 - a. [6:8-15] Stephen is accused of blasphemy against God's Temple & Law
 - b. [7:1-53] Stephen explains the Law, Temple & Prophets were sent by God, but rejected by their forefathers.
 - c. The Law, Temple & Prophets all point to Jesus, also sent by God, now rejected by the religious people.

Testify to the truth about Jesus [Acts 7:54-58]

1. [54-55] A contrast in conflict responses
 - a. [54] The civic-religious leaders are enraged, literally grinding their teeth.
 - i. Such a response is always in reference to the godless & wicked (cf. Job 16:9; Psa 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; Lam 2:16; Matt 8:12; 13:42 & 50; 22:13; 24:51; Luke 13:28).
 - b. [55] In contrast, Stephen faces their rage calmly & peacefully because he's full of the Holy Spirit (cf. 6:3,5,10).
 - i. In the same way, when we face suffering with Jesus, the Spirit rests upon us (cf. 1 Pet 4:13-14).
 - ii. God comforts with a vision of the Heavens parting, the glory of God, and Jesus at God's right hand.
 - c. It's easy to fixate on immediate circumstances/frustration/suffering, but Stephen fixes his eyes on Jesus.
 - i. Seeing the glory of the risen, living Jesus strips the threat of harm of its power over Stephen.
 - ii. Application: Look to Jesus first, rather than as last resort, for comfort & strength.
2. [56] Stephen makes a bold declaration.
 - a. Just as Jesus did when He was on trial (cf. Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69), Stephen declares Jesus is not only Messiah, but exalted to the right hand throne of God in Heaven.
 - i. It's a declaration that Jesus is co-eternal, co-equal, co-reigning with the Father, as God.
 - ii. It is a parting shot: Access to God is no longer through the Temple, but through Jesus.
 - b. The truth about Jesus: He is God over us all.
3. [57-58] The response: This gospel is so offensive, the religious folk are pushed over the edge.
 - a. [57] They do not wait for a legal trial nor listen anymore, but attack him for blasphemy
 - i. Blasphemy: Sin of insulting the name of God; defined as directly or indirectly detracting from the glory & honor of God; the opposite of worship
 1. Lowering God's honor/status as God, or elevating another as equal to God (cf. 2 Kgs 19:4).
 2. A sin punishable by death by stoning (cf. Lev 24:-10-16).
 - b. [58] They toss Stephen outside the city (rejection from fellowship; cf. Heb 13:12) & stoned to death.
 - i. We're introduced to Saul (young Pharisee) as a villain of the story, lurking in the background.
 - ii. Just as Stephen had rebuked them (7:51-53), they reject Jesus as God.
 - c. Martyr: (*Martus*) literally, "witness."
 - i. Comes to mean: One who testifies to the truth, even if it costs one's life.
 - ii. Mark of genuine Jesus follower: Testifying to the truth about Jesus, no matter the cost.
4. Application: Do you testify the truth to people that Jesus is God over us all?
 - a. If Jesus is God, does He have authority to direct your dollars/days, your decisions, relationships?

- b. Does He define who you are, or do you put Him in a box based on your preference/convenience?
- c. If Jesus is God, do you testify to that truth to others in your words & lifestyle?

If Jesus is God, follow His example [Acts 7:59-8:1]

1. What does it look like to live out that truth, even die for it? Stephen literally follows Jesus' example.
 - a. Even as he falls to his knees, head in a haze from the pummeling, he cries out to Jesus.
2. [59] Stephen declares his complete trust & submission of his life to Jesus.
 - a. His words sound like Jesus' words on the cross (cf. Luke 23:46).
 - i. Jesus puts His hope/trust of resurrected victory in His Father's hands as God.
 - ii. Stephen puts his hope/trust or resurrected victory in Jesus' hands as God.
 - b. Personal declaration, not of defeat, but victory:
 - i. I completely trust/submit my life/eternity to Jesus as God.
 - c. Application: If Jesus is God, are you willing to follow His example, submit all of your life (even its end) in complete trust in Him?
3. [60] Stephen blesses his enemies with forgiveness.
 - a. He doesn't shy away from calling it what it is: Sin (not justice or God's will; it's evil done against him).
 - b. He doesn't retaliate or become likewise enraged
 - c. His last thoughts are of grace, mercy, forgiveness
 - i. With his dying breath, his words sound like Jesus' words on the cross (cf. Luke 23:34).
 - ii. He is obedient to his Master's command to love his enemies (cf. Luke 6:27-36).
 - d. Application: If Jesus is God, are you willing to follow His example, giving people what they need (grace & forgiveness) instead of what they "deserve"?
4. Does Jesus answer Stephen's prayer for forgiveness?
 - a. There is only one person named from the angry mob: Saul (who will persecute the Church further).
 - i. [Acts 9] Saul receives forgiveness & Jesus as Savior, Lord, God over his life.
 - ii. He will follow Jesus & Stephen's example, declaring: "To live is Christ; to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).
 - b. Stephen trusted Jesus' promise of blessing for persecution (cf. Matt 5:10); you never know the ripple effect.
 - c. Application: How do you respond when someone wounds you or is unjust toward you?
 - i. Does it reflect Jesus' example on the cross? Does it reflect Jesus as God over your life & theirs?
 - ii. Like Stephen & Jesus, we don't sweep hurts under the rug; we address sin as sin.
 - iii. Like Stephen & Jesus, we don't retaliate/escalate; we give grace & forgiveness.

Conclusion

1. What would be the last thing on your lips/mind, when staring at death's door? When people wrongly persecute you?
 - a. Stephen faces death, completely trusting/yielding himself to Jesus, transformed by the Holy Spirit.
2. It's not how you start, but how you finish.
 - a. Illustration: Eric Liddell; 1923 quarter-mile race; missionary to China.
 - b. Perhaps you haven't started well, but Jesus is in the business of redemption & transformation.
3. How can we face hardship/death? Stephen's comfort.
 - a. When Jesus faced His accusers, He proclaimed: "From now on, the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69; cf. Eph 1:20; Col 3:1).
 - b. Here, He is not seated, but standing for Stephen (7:55, 56).
 - i. Jesus knows the suffering/sacrifice Stephen faces, & stands, showing His love, concern, acceptance & honor for Stephen. He approves of Stephen; He's ready to receive Stephen (cf. Luke 12:8).
 - c. When we endure suffering, don't forget who stands in Heaven on your behalf.
 - i. He is not powerless. He rules & reigns in Heaven as Sovereign Lord; He triumphed over sin/grace.
 - ii. We can yield ourselves/our lives to Jesus, & follow Him no matter the cost (in sacrifice, suffering, rejection, even death), knowing that He is true God, He's worth it, & stands on our behalf.
4. The gift of eternal life is free (grace); the cost of discipleship (to follow Jesus) is high: It costs us everything.
 - a. Give all of my life, all that I am to Jesus, because He is true God. May you finish well.