

8. The Stoning of Stephen

Acts: 7:54-8:1

After Stephen had finished calling the religious leaders stiff-necked people who were uncircumcised in hearts and ears, the religious leaders were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. Be 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, "Look, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

But they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of his execution.

INTRODUCTION: (Ask a pre-story question to discuss in pairs or as a group.)

- Think of a time in your life that you did not want to hear the truth? Explain what happened.

THE STORY: Tell the story and learn it together as a group through many repetitions.

POST-STORY DISCUSSION: Lead a discussion guided by these questions:

OUTLINE VERSION (for teacher to use when teaching)

Details: What happened? To see what truths we can learn.

- **Stephen called the leaders stiff necked people with uncircumcised ears and hearts. How did the religious leaders respond? Why would the accusation about “uncircumcised hearts” anger them.**
- **What did Stephen see? -**
 - **The Son of Man (Jesus) STANDING** at the right hand of God.
 - **Here Jesus is standing instead of sitting - what does that teach?**
- **What is the meaning of “SON of MAN”? -**
 - Daniel 7.13-14
 - Mark 14:61-62 Here Jesus is claiming that He is indeed God, the Messiah.
- **What was the religious leaders’ reaction to Stephen’s vision? What does it teach us?**
- **What did they do before stoning? Why? .**
- **What were Stephen’s final words? How was this like Jesus?**
- **How was Stephen able to forgive his persecutors?**

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow are found in this story. Which ones still apply to us today?

- **Preach the Gospel**, including both judgment for sin and grace for sinners
- **Be faithful even when persecuted**
- **Take up your cross and follow Jesus.**
- **Receive the Holy Spirit in all his fullness.**
- **Focus on God, not man-** put eyes on eternal things.
- **Eagerly expect our ultimate glorification.**
- **Forgive your enemies** as Christ as forgiven you.

FOCUS on FORGIVENESS:

- **What reasons would Stephen have had to NOT forgive these people? I.e. What excuses could he have made?**
- **What was the key to Stephen’s being able to forgive his murderers?**
- **What grace did God show Stephen even in the midst of his stoning?**
 - **How did this encourage him?**
- **How was the content of Stephen’s speech related to the vision that God gave Stephen.**
- **How had Jesus set an example to help Stephen?**

- **One definition of forgiveness: Forgiveness is, my releasing the guilty person from the punishment due for their sins against me – just as the Father releases me from the punishment due for my sins against Him. How did Stephen exemplify this?**
- **How do people “punish” those who have sinned against them when they refuse to forgive?**

General Application: (discuss with whole group)

- **Who are people we struggle to forgive? What type of excuses might someone give to not forgiven? What is our natural reaction when someone sins against us?**

Personal Application:

- **Who do you struggle to forgive right now? How have you been “collecting the debt” from them? What would it cost to forgive them? Can you believe the gospel enough by faith to forgive them?**

FULL VERSION (for teacher to use for study in preparation)

Let's look at the details that we observe describing what happened in the story in order to see what truths we can learn.

- **Stephen called the leaders stiff necked people with uncircumcised ears and hearts. How did the religious leaders respond? Why would the accusation about “uncircumcised hearts” anger them?**
 - Leaders ground their teeth - (Luke 13.28 - weeping and gnashing of teeth) - became like animals, hardening of heart
 - They are supposed to be the ones obedient to the law, the ones who are truly circumcised, but he is saying their circumcision is not sincere.
 - The natural man will always reject the word of God no matter how great it is preached unless God does the work of regenerating the listener.
- **What did Stephen see? -**
 - full of the Holy Spirit, he was able to gaze into heavens
 - **The Son of Man (Jesus) STANDING** at the right hand of God.
 - **How is Jesus normally described in Scripture when in heaven?**
 - Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3, Ephesians 1:20, Romans 8:34, Hebrews 8:1, Hebrews 10:12, Hebrews 12:2 - always sitting.
 - **In this story Jesus is standing - what does that teach us?**
 - He is standing in order to welcome Stephen, to show him great honor as the first Christian martyr.
 - Stood to receive him into the Kingdom of heaven.
- **What is the meaning of “SON of MAN”? –**

- Daniel 7.13-14 describes one like a son of man who is led into the presence of the God, who is given all authority, glory, sovereign power, worship, and dominion. He is the promised Messiah.
- So Stephen was claiming that Jesus was the Son of Man described in Daniel 7, the Messiah that was promised.
- Mark 14:61-62 shows Jesus making the same claim about himself that Stephen does here. At his trial before the Sanhedrin, when the high priest asked him, *“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed one?”* His answer: *“I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*
 - Here Jesus is claiming that He is indeed God, the Messiah.
- **What was the religious leaders’ reaction to Stephen’s vision? What does it teach us?**
 - What Stephen said made them furious. They cried out loudly and stopped ears. (Was ironic. They were thus displaying their uncircumcized ears!) refused to listen to any more. They rushed at him to take him outside the city to stone him.
 - The religious leaders were very aware that Stephen was claiming to be the Messiah, Jesus, who was in fact the promised Son of Man.
 - Hardened unbelievers completely refuse to listen to the truth.
 - Similarly the high priest had said in Mark 14:63 to Jesus, *“The high priest tore his clothes. ‘Why do we need any more witnesses?’ he asked. ‘You have heard the blasphemy.’”*
- **What did they do before stoning? Why?**
 - Laid their garments down at feet of Saul. Stoning is a sweaty, slow business, needed freedom for movement to throw harder. Saul approved of their actions and was happy to share the responsibility. He was a devout Jew who hated the Christians.
 - Saul saw and heard all that Stephen said.
- **Stephen’s final words :**
 - Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.
 - Lord, do not hold this sin against them.
 - How do we see similarities with Jesus? Followed his example, even to death.
 - Imitating Christ by forgiving persecutors.
 - In forgiving them and telling them of the Son of Man in heaven he is bearing witness, even giving them a chance to understand the Christ and repent.
 - Fell asleep - died, but rose to glory in the other life!
- **How was Stephen able to forgive his persecutors?**
 - He believed the Gospel, i.e he knew how great his own sin was and how great the forgiveness of God was for him. He does not need to have vengeance because he knows God is in control of that.
 - He saw the glory of Christ.

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow are found in this story. Which ones still apply to us today?

- **Preach the Gospel**, including both judgment for sin and grace for sinners
- **Be faithful even when persecuted**
- **Take up your cross and follow Jesus.** There is great blessing even in dying for him.
- **Receive the Holy Spirit in all his fullness.** Ask him to give you more and more of himself. Asking, seeking, knocking for God to give us more and more of the Holy Spirit. (Luke 11:13)
- Looked up to heaven. **Focus on God, not man-** put eyes on eternal things.
- **Eagerly expect our ultimate glorification.**
- **Forgive your enemies** as Christ as forgiven you.

FOCUS on FORGIVENESS:

- **What reasons would Stephen have had to NOT forgive these people? I.e. What excuses could he have made?**
 - "I have told them the truth and they've rejected it."
 - "They are persecuting and killing me even though I am innocent of sinning against them."
 - "They are the same crowd who killed Jesus."
 - "They are lying and complaining against me."
 - "I am a true believer and am better than them."
 - "They are causing me so much pain and suffering."
 - "I don't deserve this treatment. I am God's servant and preach the truth. They don't deserve my forgiveness."
- **What was the key to Stephen's being able to forgive his murderers?**
 - He had faith in God's love for him as a sinner, of his forgiveness and righteousness bought by Christ. He was full of grace.
 - He knew the truth of God's salvation through Christ, what God had been doing through history to bring him and other sinners a Savior.
 - He knew his position in Christ.
 - He was humble. He knew he needed grace just as his persecutors did. He viewed them as fellow sinners.
- **What grace did God show Stephen even in the midst of his stoning?**
 - He showed him Jesus exalted. A special vision of the Savior!
- **How did this encourage him?**
 - Showed him where he was going – his own glorification.
- **How was the content of Stephen's speech related to the vision that God gave Stephen.**
 - Christ's (and our) glorification is the consummation or completion of the whole history of redemption beginning in the Old Testament.
- **How had Jesus set an example to help Stephen?**
 - He had said on the cross about his murderers, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."
- **One definition of forgiveness: Forgiveness is, my releasing the guilty person from the punishment due for their sins against me – just as the**

Father releases me from the punishment due for my sins against Him.

How did Stephen exemplify this?

- He asked God to forgive them, to show them the same mercy through the same Savior! He wished for them the same mercy he had found.
- **How do people “punish” those who have sinned against them when they refuse to forgive?**
 - Treat them coldly. Distance ourselves.
 - Gossip
 - Remind them of their sins. (Keep a record of wrongs.)
 - Refuse to see anything good in them.
 - Treat them like they owe you something.
- **Tim Keller – 5 ways we “collect the debt”**
 - Become self-righteously “merciful”. Put them in further debt by our mercy.
 - Act cold towards someone, ignoring them.
 - Become demanding.
 - Damage their reputation by warning others about them or publicly “sharing our pain”
 - Rejoice when they are hurt or fail.

General Application: (discuss with whole group)

- **Who are people we struggle to forgive? What type of excuses might someone give to not forgive? What is our natural reaction when someone sins against us?**

Personal Application:

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