

Acts 7:54-60
Easter 7; May 13-14, 2018

Sometimes, you can do everything right and still have things appear to fail. History is full of examples. One such is found in the man we find in our text. His name was Stephen. This man was a Christian *“superman”* The Christian Church had just exploded. At the time of Stephen, some have estimated that the Christian Church had exploded to the size of 25,000 people. It had become too big for the Apostles to handle by themselves. So, they got together and chose 7 different men to oversee areas of ministry in the Christian Church. They had some qualifications for these men. They had to be wise, but more importantly they had to be men full of the Spirit. In other words, they needed to wear their Christian heart on their back.

Stephen is chosen to be in charge of the food pantry of the Christian Church. Stephen was **“full of grace and power; was doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”** (Acts 6:8) He was so incredibly gifted that even though he was chosen to make sure all the widows who didn't have enough food were being provided for, he didn't stop with that just task. He would also go out and preach and debate some of the most intelligent anti-Christian people around him. Stephen was so faithful to his God that he was not going to let anyone stop him. He was doing everything right, he was saying the right words, he was doing the right actions. He was a gifted leader and preacher of God.

God had been doing incredible things for the Christian Church, but that was all about to change. There had been incredible joy among the Christians. They were all about to experience incredible pain. That is where our text picks up the story of the early Christian Church. Luke is showing us that you can have the right stuff, the right momentum, the right leaders, the right everything and yet you can even get stoned for it. This morning he shows us that being faithful to God can be painful. If you were on the outside and were looking in to the church at the time of Stephen, it looks like everything is blowing up.

Opposition had arose against the church. That opposition began to focus on a man named Stephen. The leaders of that day did not like what Stephen was saying. So, they arrested him. They brought in false witnesses and we are told: **“We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”** (Acts 6:11) What happens next? Luke tells us: **“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”** (Acts 6:15)

Remember who else had a face that glowed? **“When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.”** (Ex. 34:29) Luke is connecting Stephen to Moses. What does Stephen do? He preaches like the Apostle Peter who had also been connected to Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. On Pentecost (which we celebrate next week) Peter had stood up in front of the people in Jerusalem and said in the book of Acts: **“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”** (Acts 2:36) When they heard these words, they were cut to the heart. They asked Peter what they could do. Peter responds: **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”** (Acts 2:38) What happens? 3,000 people do what Peter says and were added to the Christian Church.

What does Stephen do? For 53 verses in Acts chapter 7, he preaches God's plan of salvation and how they had opposed God. Finally, Stephen gets to the point. **“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors.”** When the Sanhedrin heard those words, they were not cut to the heart. They were furious with Stephen. They drag him out of the city. They scream at him at the top of their voices, and stone him to death.

The author of this book is a man named Luke. Luke who is a doctor; a doctor who would know what those stones would do to a body. Yet, what does Luke talk about? He doesn't talk about the pain. He doesn't say that Stephen should have kept his mouth shut so he wouldn't die that day. Even though Stephen did experience pain that day, he speaks about how successful Stephen had been. You see that in our text today: **“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.”** It doesn't look successful, does it? Before Stephen dies, he sees Jesus in heaven. Luke wants his readers to know that even though God's believers experience pain in this world, it will all be okay; because Jesus is there in heaven waiting for us.

Not only did Stephen suffer pain that day, but the Christian Church was about to face pain like they had never seen before. Who else is at that scene? Luke tells us: **“Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”** Luke continues: **“And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”**

On that day, the Church didn't grow by 3,000 with the death of Stephen. There were no people asking what they could do to be saved. There was no one being baptized. The same book that talks about the Church's explosive growth, also speaks about the horrific pain that the Church can go through that day. On that day, the Church began to shrink. It would be scattered all across the world.

Yet, God wanted his believers to know that he had not abandoned them. He did not abandon Stephen that day. He did not abandon his Church that day. He doesn't abandon us. We might get discouraged. We may feel guilt. We may be filled with anger. We may doubt. But God wants us to know that **“Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”** The Christian Church is not going to die.

Jesus assures us that he has paid for your sins. No sin is too great for him to forgive. He died for you. He rose for you. He ascended back to heaven for you. He is ruling over everything for you. He is **standing at the right hand of God** for you. What did that mean for Stephen? **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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.** Jesus was not going to let Stephen's pain be meaningless. Even though the Church would suffer an incredible amount of pain through persecution, he wanted it to know that it was not going to be meaningless. The man standing at the right hand of God had a plan. Even though the church at Jerusalem would be scattered, it would spread like wildfire out into the world. The pain that was meant to destroy would make it grow. May the Lord help all of us to remember that as we travel this maze of life, that in Jesus, we can pray the final prayer of Stephen: **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Amen.**