

Acts 6:8-8:1 Death is no barrier

It has been fascinating to see the impact of the eruption of the volcano in Iceland. A great surprise that such a small country and can such a vast impact across the world.

We just finished a major part of the story of Acts and the unstoppable message. The focus was the growth of the message in Jerusalem. Today we start into a new section which focus' on the growth of the unstoppable message in Judea, Galilee, Samaria and into Syria.

It is very surprising the event God uses to kick off this new part of the story of the unstoppable message of Jesus.

1. The relentless opposition to the message

Read: 6:8

There's been a role shift for Stephen. Stephen not only uses his God given Spirit and wisdom to give out charity but also to speak. Stephen is continuing the pattern of the Apostles. In his powerfully Spirit filled bold preaching. Not only in these things but also in the opposition he faces.

See V9-10

When they couldn't win against his theology. They turned to attack his personal character.

See v.11

Public opinion has been swayed. The attack on his character then turned to physical opposition.

See vv.12-13

We must make sure that it only others are who treat us like this and that we don't take up these tactics ourselves.

But there was no denying there was something profoundly different about this man.

See v.15

Howard Marshall says, "*The description is of a person who is close to God and reflects some of his glory as a result of being in his presence.*"

What was deep in his soul and heart from being close to God shone through and out of his face.

Stephen's example teaches us to expect suffering if we follow the Savior. But we also can expect His faithful presence with us. So we must entrust our souls to Him and do what is right. He is an example to be faithful under trial and trust Jesus for His Spirit to give power, boldness and the right words.

2. The rejection of God servants

Read: 7:2ff

Stephen doesn't give a defence as if he's in the box by answering the charges against him. *HE turns the tables* on his accusers. He brings an indictment against them.

Stephen gives a sermon from the OT

The message is plain: "You people have a habit of rejecting the saviors God sends to you. Why don't you wake up and stop rejecting Jesus?"

In 7:2 Stephen moves alongside them to eventually to standing opposing them.

He starts by saying this is OUR story. Remember Abraham our common ancestor. He then turns to 3 saviours or messengers who are rejected by Israel to show the pattern. This sums up the whole history of Israel. We'll follow this thread through the sermon.

Firstly v. 9 **Joseph** was rejected. He was rejected but would eventually be a saviour.

Then in v.20-22 we are introduced to **Moses**. A saviour figure and a messenger who God appeared to.

He was rejected.

See v.27,35,39

He was the one sent by God. V.35 to be deliverer and messenger.

See vv.37 ,38

He was God chosen servant.

In v.52 Stephen says they also rejected the **prophets**.

Finally and ultimately they rejected the Messiah.

v.52 As you rejected Moses so when the ultimate saviour came along you rejected him.

Stephen gets to his application in v.51. I wonder if sometimes that could apply to us. I wonder if v.51 describes some of us. Think of the privileges some of us have had from God. Some have grown up in Christian homes. Taught about Jesus. Taken to Sunday School. Some have even been to Christian schools. We can all of that and still push Jesus aside. Get out of the way. Or keep him at arms length. Knowing him but not embracing him.

We often think, "Drug addicts, prostitutes, and hardened criminals are blinded and hardened against the gospel. But good, church-going, religious folks are more open." Not true! These Jews built their whole lives around religion, but they did not know God in a personal way and they did not have their sins forgiven. They are about to lynch an innocent man in the name of their religion. Religion can never save a person from sin, because it relies on human effort and good works. Religion often keeps a person from salvation because it fosters self-righteousness and pride. A religious person must humble his pride and admit that he is a sinner and accepts God's forgiveness.

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3. The receiving of a faithful witness

Read: 54-55

F. F Bruce says:- "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."

In v.55 The word 'and' can sometimes be taken as 'even' or 'that is'. He saw the glory of God ie Jesus. He sees Jesus standing. Usually Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God. Why standing? Jesus is standing as witness to Stephen approving of him. As if he is standing to welcome him. It shows that Jesus is standing ready to judge those who deny him and reject his servants.

Now look at 57-58. This is too much for them. These religious people turn into an out of control mob.

Read vv.59-60

Even as he breathes his last breath and utters his last words Stephen is living like his Saviour Jesus. In his stoning he is imitating Jesus in the way he dies.

He has no hesitation in praying to Jesus as God rather than the Father.

Spurgeon wrote,

"Dying Christians are not troubled with questions as to the deity of Christ. Dear friends, Unitarianism may do to live with, but it will not do to die with, at least for us. At such a time we need an almighty and divine Savior; we want "God over all, blessed forever" to come to our rescue in the solemn article."

WE all started **LOOKING FOR APPROVAL** from an early age.

One comedian said that we like the answering machine. When we come home and see the light flashes it means we have messages. I must be important I have messages. He gives us an approval rating.

But where we look for approval it is always based on performance.

The approval of one is all that matters. The judgment of one is all that matters.

If you have Jesus standing for you having given his life for you you have nothing to fear.

We must daily be trusting Jesus in a practical way in every trial that we face in order to have the habit of faith to trust Him at the moment of death. Stephen's life was all of one piece. He was full of faith and the Holy Spirit in life; he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit as he died. Are you trusting, really trusting, in Jesus right now?

Then it will be your habit to trust Him when you die.

When Ruth Bell, who later would marry Billy Graham, was a little girl, she had a passion for martyrdom. She grew up in China, where her parents were missionaries. She used to pray every night that the Lord would let her be a martyr before the end of the year. She wanted bandits to capture and behead her for Jesus' sake. Her sister, Rosa, used to think, "How horrid!" So every night when Ruth prayed like that, Rosa would pray, "Lord,

don't You listen to her."

While we should not pray for martyrdom, we should desire to imitate the bold witness of those who have given their lives for the sake of the gospel. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, left us an example of a godly, courageous witness. His name means "victor's crown."

4. The great surprise – the ringing out of the message

Read it: 8:1b-8

The end of the story of the unstoppable message in Jerusalem comes to an abrupt and tragic end with the first martyr and the scattering of the disciples.

However in God's purposes this leads to the next stage in completing Jesus' promise of the message going to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Persecution leads the message spreading. This not because of a church plan that is approved and put into action by the leaders but because ordinary believers take the opportunities God gives them to share the message of Jesus wherever they go.

Opposition in one place means opportunity for others in another place.

Tertullian a Christian standing before the rulers of the Roman Empire cried out:-

"Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust...The more you mow us down, the more we grow; seed of the church is the blood of Christians."

It's not the length of your life that matters, but the strength of your influence for God.

The great surprise event that has had an impact of the world.