

## The Death of Stephen

- Acts 7:54-8:1
- Dennis Rainey wrote this several years ago about strange things people collect. “Francis Johnson of Darwin, Minnesota has been collecting string since 1950. His ball of thread measures over 10 feet in diameter and weighs five tons! (That’s a man who needs a life). Or, how about Canadian Sailor Joe Simmons who died in 1965 with nearly 5,000 tattoos! (it was the last one that killed him.) There’s a man in New Orleans with 129 Corvairs, and a Dallas man I met several years ago has over 4,000 hotel keys (he even told me of another collector who had made off with more than 10,000). I’ve even heard of a collection of the addresses of famous people—3,500 listings. But the prize for the most unusual collection goes to Italian dentist Giovanni Battista Orsenigo who by 1903 had a collection of 2,000,744 teeth he had extracted himself!” ...Then Dennis Rainey goes on to say that he collects “exit lines,” or the last words of dying men. And the theme is consistent. Those who die without Christ are either belligerent or hopeless. Those who die in Christ are joyful, or at least peaceful. Voltaire was a French author and atheist who was famous for predicting that within 50 years of his death, which happened in 1778, Christianity would be stamped out. But fifty years after his death, one of Voltaire’s homes was being used by the Geneva Bible Society. These were Voltaire’s last words: “I am abandoned by God and man! I shall go to hell! O Christ, O Jesus Christ!” *Augustus Toplady, author of the great hymn “Rock of Ages,” who died at age 38 said, “I enjoy heaven already in my soul. My prayers are all converted into praises.”* So, what did Stephen say? And what can we learn from him today about death?
- I am not interested in the Sanhedrin this morning. We can’t learn much from them except how to reject God and kill those who obey Him. I would rather learn from the one in this story who believed God and died well because of His belief. We need to be ready to die like this. Not like this as in, being martyred, though that may happen. But whether we fall asleep like JC Bolick did eleven days ago and basically died of old age, or whether we die prematurely because of disease or a car accident or by the hands of evil men, like Stephen, we can be sure that we will all die. Right? Unless the Lord comes back. We cannot be sure of how we will die, just that we will die. But we can ALSO be sure of this very important truth: we are not ready to live well until we are ready to die well. How we can be ready to die well? There are three statements Stephen makes as his life is ending that give us three powerful truths about death. Death is an enemy. Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:26, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” But for the Christian, death is not an enemy any longer. It is a doorway. A transition into the life that God created us for in the first place. That’s why Paul could say in Philippians 1 that he was hard-pressed between the two. “My desire is to depart and to be with Christ, for that is far better.” But he said before that, to live is Christ and to die is gain. He was ready to “live in Christ” because he was ready to gain more of Christ through death. It’s why the psalmist could write in Psalm 116:18, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” Let’s look at these three statements Stephen made at the time of his death and see what God would teach us from them.
- **“Behold, I see the heavens open...”** (vs. 56) Stephen saw into heaven. God pulled back the veil for a moment so that Stephen could see the reality that was much greater than a bunch of angry men picking up rocks while shoving him out of town. I believe that for Christians, our impending death opens our eyes to see Jesus more clearly. Stephen was even given a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. We may not have a vision like that, but I believe we will see Him more clearly and walk with Him more nearly. Psalm 23 grows in our understanding as we mature as a sheep, but this part we really don’t *know* until we need to know it: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for

Thou art with me." Someone said, "Think not of death as the extinguishing of life, but rather the snuffing out of a candle because dawn has come."

Notice in Stephen's vision that Jesus was standing, not sitting. Two thoughts on that are that as Stephen was confessing Him before men, Jesus was confessing Stephen to His Father. Just as he said He would. But a second thought many have had on this is that Jesus was ready to welcome His servant home. That's what I believe JC experienced on Oct. 2. He was ushered into the presence of the One who stood, arms open wide, nail-scarred hands ready to receive him home. That brings up the second statement from Stephen:

- **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** (vs. 59) As Stephen was being stoned to death, and his life was ending, he welcomed death as a passageway into the presence of the Lord. Cotton Mather, the last of the great Puritan preachers, died in 1728 with these words: "Is this dying? Is this all? Is this what I feared when I prayed against a hard death? Oh, I can bear this! I can bear this!" Yes, and so can we. Death is the servant of the follower of Jesus Christ because God uses it to usher us into His presence. To be absent from the body, Paul said, is to be present with the Lord.
- **"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."** (vs. 60) Again, Stephen follows His Lord, saying the same thing that Jesus did when He was being crucified. We see the character of Stephen, his Christ-likeness, even while being stoned to death for preaching the Gospel. You know what the enemy of our souls wants to do, don't you? He wants to use our impending death, or the death of a loved one, to make us angry, or bitter, or to fill us with deep sadness or self-pity. But we don't see any of that in the character of Stephen. Instead, he is praying for his murderers.
- There was a young man watching the garments of those who stoned Stephen that day. And Chapter 8 starts with the words, "And Saul approved of his execution." But he heard every word. Saw every action of the angry mob and every Christ-like reaction of Stephen. I have to believe that Paul may have been thinking years later about this day and about Stephen when he wrote this to the Philippian church while suffering for the Gospel in prison: "it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." (Phil. 1:20)
- Paul learned to die well by watching Stephen. May God help us do the same.