

Acts 7:51-8:3

When Dying Is Gain

Ryan Perz ~ February 2, 2020

Intro: My guess is that Americans talked about death more this past week than normal. Last Sunday Kobe Bryant, at a youthful 41 and his 13 yr old daughter were killed in a helicopter crash. Even if Kobe did not hold the level of fame he did, when we hear of an unexpected death, it should cause us to pause and think of how unpredictable life really is.

Question: Is dying in the prime of life, or in teenage years, the worst thing imaginable?

- Church history tells us that Stephen, our preacher in Acts 7 was a youthful 29 when the Lord called him home.

There is a simple truth that goes like this: When we are young, we may die, when we are old, we must die.

- The apostle Paul challenges the typical view of death being the worst thing—he speaks differently; (Phil 1:21) “To live is Christ and to die is gain”.

Living for Christ (51-53)

- Before we move into the living for Christ element, there is a lesson on how NOT to listen to preaching.

There are multiple wrong ways to listen to a sermon

1. Hypocritical listening—giving a nod, amen, affirming truth but being unwilling to change
2. Heard-it-before listening—it’s the “I’ve heard that before” attitude. Nothing new.
3. Hateful listening—that’s this category. Instead of the heart turning tender, it grows more bitter and resentful toward God.

The opposite of those is humble listening, an Is 66:2 trembling that we saw in the last message.

Apply: How will you listen, friends?

- Stephen lives for Christ in several areas
 1. He has a certain boldness about him. He is not afraid to confront rebellious attitudes.

- Look back at the attributes of Stephen, he is a man full of grace and the Holy Spirit.
- The fruit of the Spirit is Gal 5:22-23.
- But that is not what is primary in Acts—not to downplay the fruit—but empowerment of disciples.

Being filled with the Spirit in Acts stresses boldness in witness.

- Boldness is not just seen in proclaiming truth about Jesus—it’s also persuading people that if they do not believe him, they reject him. They reject the Holy Spirit (v51)—not a mystical force, but the third person of the Trinity.

2. He takes sin very seriously

- Jumping down to v53, he charges Israel’s leaders as being lawbreakers. There is an irony in that.
- Sin, by its very nature is lawlessness.

(1 Jn 3:4) “Sin is lawlessness”

Apply: Many have “selective obedience”—obeying in areas they want or areas they are passionate about.

Selective obedience is disobedience. *What God calls for is full obedience.*

3. He preaches a gospel that will offend

- Now there are some people who just like to offend.
- But this is not behind Stephen’s message. He speaks God’s truth, but in love (extending forgiveness).
—Mt 15:12 “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”

—Gal 5:11 “¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

Living for Christ means two things.

1. Knowing Christ through his gospel. At the very basic level, it means taking our own sin very seriously. It means that we know the law crushes (Rom 3:20), but the gospel heals. You can’t begin to live for Christ unless you know him first and know his saving grace.

(Gal 4:9) “But now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by him.”

2. Living for Christ means boldness for him. Most Christians I know, including myself, can use this challenge.

Dying as Gain (54-60)

- Stephen receives no “Amen”, just anger.
- It’s not just dismissive, but destruction and death they want.
- Stephen’s accusers are *ravenous* and *beast-like*.

-Stephen’s ending mirrors Jesus. He is set on trial, preaches the truth, defends the truth, and dies for the truth.

- Stoning=Stephen would have been pushed off from a high place—if he didn’t die from that, then large paving stones would be used to crush his body. He becomes the first Christian martyr.

*This last point is so very foreign. Most of us do not personally know someone who lost their lives for Christ. But persecution should be more normal.

- Listen to 2 Tim 3:12 - “¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,”

I worked with a man once who, when he didn’t want to do, he would reply, “It’s not part of my job description”. The irony was that we were all general laborers in a factory.

Christians—we are servants of Christ. We can’t think or say that suffering for the gospel is not part of our job description.

If we are not suffering—the question may be...*are we really working?*

- Shifting gears, Stephen’s death also gives a picture of what it looks like to die in faith.

There is one main and ultimate goal for every Christian: *Finish your race with your eyes fixed on Jesus.*

Stephen is a great model for how we would all want to go out (minus the stoning): focused, in faith, and forgiving.

1. He is focused (55-56).

—Not focused in having achieved his life goals, or everything on his bucket list...but focused on Jesus.

- Specifically, he sees the place he is going and person he will be with (v55-56)

The title Stephen uses for Jesus is really important (v56) —Son of Man

- It's drawn from Dan 7:13-14 and highlights Jesus's authority and control over all things

¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.

***It pictures Jesus in his divine nature carrying all authority*

In other words, the final words of Stephen's sermon are this: *Jesus is Worthy!!*

He is worth my full trust, my full obedience, my full life.. He is worth dying for.

Can you say the same? Does Jesus have your full trust, obedience, life? Would we die for him? It only makes sense...his one life was given for us.

The Puritan, John Owen, wrote a lot; his final book before he died is called "The Glory of Christ".

It's a devotional meditation on the person of Christ.

***As people near the end of their race, they need more focus on Christ's glory, not less.*

—Here is a quote that can speak to a complacent soul

"It is impossible that he who never meditates with delight on the glory of Christ here in this world, who labors not to behold it by faith as it is revealed in the Scriptures, should ever have any real gracious desire to behold it in heaven" (*The Glory of Christ*, Christian Focus Publications, pg. 83)

Practically, if we are not reading scripture with an *appetite for the glory of Christ*, we are missing the mark. Is your appetite for the glory of Christ?

Question: What gets Stephen killed? It's not what he says in v 51. It's what he sees...*It's sharing the exalted view of Jesus.*

As we go through Acts, my conscience is being pricked that I do not say enough to outsiders that exalts Jesus. Let's be focused on Jesus in life and death; in witness and waiting.

2. He dies in faith (59)

- Stephen quotes from Ps 31:5
- Jesus quoted from the same Psalm (Lk 23:46)

But here is a main difference: Jesus committed his spirit to the Father; Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus. Another connection point to Jesus's divinity and High Place.

3. He dies with Forgiveness (60)

- The final thing we see Stephen do is die by extending forgiveness.
- Our minds can go to several places in scripture
 1. Jesus who forgave his enemies at the cross. (Lk 23:34)
 2. Or maybe we think of Jesus's teaching - (Lk 6:37) "forgive and you will be forgiven"

One thing is for sure. Stephen gets the gospel. Getting the gospel is understanding that we are all unworthy sinners; if God can extend mercy to us, his mercy can break through to anyone.

Paul, a man who later says he is chief of sinners is brought in the picture (58).

Christians can't go to their graves withholding forgiveness.

One of the most powerful modern stories of personal forgiveness is found in the life of Louis Zamperini. His story demonstrates the power of love and forgiveness—found in the book and movie *Unbroken*. Zamperini

was captured in WW2 and tortured in a Japanese POW camp. It scarred him for life and made him a hateful and abusive man. But Christ saved him. Decades later he wrote a letter to the main soldier who tortured him.

“I committed my life to Christ. Love has replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, “Forgive your enemies and pray for them.”

- The heart that forgives is the heart that loves.
- (I Cor 13:3)—pictures a martyr’s death...but it adds a qualifier, “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, *I gain nothing.*”
- You can give your life for Christ, but if you have not given yourself in love...*you gain nothing.* There is no profit, no reward.

Conclusion

Our challenge has been to live for Christ and to see death as gain.

Living for Christ—It requires boldness, willingness to get uncomfortable, saying things that might offend. What one evangelist called “crossing the pain line.”

Only One Life,
Twill Soon be Past,
Only What’s done for Christ will last.

Dying as Gain—Focused on Christ’s glory, staying in the race of faith. But it also boils down to love. Have I loved as Christ would love? Have I fully forgiven as I’ve been forgiven?

Question: Is dying the worst thing in the world?

—No, a wasted life not lived for Christ is worse

—Living a life that lacks focus, faith, love and forgiveness...way worse

To live is Christ and to die is gain