

That's a reminder that he is the satisfaction of our souls. Like a bed of rest for my fainting flesh. I am satisfied in you. The Son of God went out to suffer in our place and to show us, to secure for us that we're safe. Isn't this a great God we serve and have come to worship today?

I want to try a sentence out on you. Faith in Christ is reflected in how we live our life, but we also see that genuine saving faith in Christ is revealed in how we face our death. Faith in Christ is reflected in how we live our life, but we also see that genuine saving faith in Christ is revealed in how we face our death.

For the past four Sundays we've been fixing our attention on Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Christian church. We've looked for these past four weeks at the speech that Stephen gave as an answer to the accusations. He was violently dragged before the Sanhedrin, accused of blaspheming God, blaspheming Moses, speaking against the Law, speaking against the temple. And Luke records for us in Chapter 7 of the Book of Acts Stephen's speech before the High Council. We see today in our text the summation of Stephen's speech and the reaction of the crowd that had dragged him before them to give an account.

Comparatively speaking, Stephen's life and death have just a brief mention in the whole of sacred Scripture. Comparatively speaking, Stephen's life and death are just a blip on the radar of human history. But Stephen's life and Stephen's death have a lasting eternal impact on believers for two thousand centuries to date, and we believe that today, in 2014, on June 15<sup>th</sup>, in this very moment, at this very time, the life and the death of Stephen will impact us. That's why we've gathered. That's why we've been looking intently at God's Word. That's why we pray and ask for God's Holy Spirit to be at work whenever a preaching event like this occurs. Regardless of who the man is, it is God's timeless, unchanging truth, and it transforms our hearts. That's what we want today. His life, his death has the power to penetrate our heart and affect our life and the way we face death as well. C.S. Lewis said you never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death for you. Martin Luther King Jr. said no one really knows why they are alive until they know what they would die for.

So the Sanhedrin had found an identity for themselves in the traditions that they kept. They had brought down the Law of God to a manageable level, if you will---which no one can do, but they had concluded and convinced themselves that they had, that they were righteous in and of themselves. And so what Stephen was doing by preaching repentance, by calling people to repentance and preaching the possibility of forgiveness for sin in the name of Jesus Christ was an affront to their way of religion.

So we pick up the reading, Acts 7:51. This is Stephen before the Sanhedrin, before the High Council. Stephen, by himself. We have no record that Luke gives us that he was supported morally by a host of apostles and new followers of Christ. We do know that the witnesses who brought the false accusations are present, and we do know that the High Council is present, and we do know that the high priest is present. And we have Stephen. He's finishing this long and impassioned speech and he says these words:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you now have betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But 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, "Behold, 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, and they stopped their ears, and they rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen---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.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Not exactly the conclusion that we might be looking for from an impassioned, truth-filled speech with the eternal soul concern before him, as he laid it out for the Sanhedrin. Not exactly the conclusion. I guess Stephen had never had that management course on how to win friends and influence people. He just said what needed to be said. Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen, a man who was full of power and of grace. We can learn a lot from Stephen. We see in Stephen's life and the way that Stephen faced his death that that he rejoiced in a completely fulfilled covenant. That's what was driving him. That he rested in a righteousness that was found in Christ, his Savior and Lord---Christ alone. We see ultimately that Stephen was receiving, that he received with contentment all that the sovereign and loving God had for him. He received with contentment whatever his God ordained because he knew the position of Christ, he knew the power of Christ, and Stephen knew intimately the person of Christ.

That's what's going on here. Stephen rejoiced in a completely fulfilled covenant. It's evident throughout the entirety of Stephen's speech that he understood the Jewish teaching. He understood his heritage. He knew from whence he came. He knew the good, the bad, and the ugly of Israel's traditions. He knew their unfaithfulness. But he knew the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he presented that God so clearly before the Sanhedrin.

Stephen had come to realize that Jesus of Nazareth, an itinerant rabbi with a following of people, was indeed the Messiah sent from God. He laid out, as he was answering the accusations, the covenant promise given to Abraham. Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children, but God was faithful to his promise. He provided to them Isaac. God fulfills his covenant faithfulness. Stephen recounts how the God of glory not only called Abraham, but faithfully worked through the lives of Isaac and then Jacob. Then Jacob had twelve sons. And Stephen highlights for the Sanhedrin that particular son, Joseph, and his story, and how through the midst of all kinds of trials and difficulties, all kinds of accusations of falsehood against him, Joseph's God is with him and Joseph's God is for him. Stephen remembers for them that God is faithful to the covenant. God makes covenant with his people, and God keeps covenant with his people. And Stephen rejoiced in a completely fulfilled covenant.

Jacob's descendants became many in the land of Egypt, he reminded them. And Stephen remembers for them, then, this great one, Moses---the deliver, the ruler. Moses, in a time of impossible odds, was provided by God. In a time when the Egyptians were ordering the firstborn Israelites to be left to the elements to die, Moses was left to the elements to die, and Pharaoh's own daughter plucked him from the Nile, raised him in Pharaoh's house and raised up for God the deliverer. Why? Because God makes the covenant and he keeps the covenant. In the midst of incredible odds, impossible odds, scripts that Hollywood can't even dream up, God says I am faithful. I laugh at your schemes of man. Because when I make a promise, I keep that promise.

Stephen is pointing that out. He's recounting the covenant faithfulness of the glorious God, as well as the unfaithfulness of God's covenant people. You've got to have both of those lessons, because both of them come hand in hand. And God is faithful when we are faithless. That's great encouragement to us today. We know we're faithless, we just don't like to admit it. We know that we can't obey. We know that we're not righteous---no, not one. And yet we're really hard-pressed to acknowledge that with reckless abandon. But until we do acknowledge that truth we cannot receive the covenant keeper on our behalf. Our salvation is not and it can not be dependent on our ability to obey. We are hopeless and most to be pitied

if it counts on our obedience.

It's what the apostle Paul is referring to in Romans Chapter 4. "To the one," he says in verse 5, "to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." That's what God is doing. He's redeeming the ungodly, the ugly, the weak, the powerless, the 'us', the 'you', the 'me'. He's not saying it's the ones who are lazy that does not work. He's saying the ones who can't obey, the ones who can't keep the covenant requirements. That's why our confession makes it clear: To those whom God effectually calls, he also justifies. But he freely justifies. He doesn't do it by any accounting or accepting their person as righteousness, not for anything that we do or is done by us, but for the sake of Christ alone. By imputing the obedience and the satisfaction of Christ to all who believe, thereby we receive and rest on him and his righteousness by faith.

And that faith is not even of ourselves; it's a gift. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 11, Paragraph 1. Believe it. It's the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Shortly before he died, the report goes out that one of the founders of our church, of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, J. Gresham Machen, sent telegram to his seminary professor friend, John Murray. The telegram read among other words, this: I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. There is no hope without it. The way Machen faced death was to be clothed in the righteousness of another.

That's where Stephen's rejoicing comes from. It's a completely fulfilled covenant a limit, and he is resting in that covenant fulfillment. He is resting in the righteousness of Christ alone. Stephen devotes a lot of his speech to the life of Moses, and in particular the fact that Moses is the one through whom God gave the Law. The Law is what reflects God's holy character. The Law is what highlights the perfection of God. And the Law is what you and I cannot achieve. That's why when Jesus comes, he fulfills the Law on our behalf.

Although Stephen never names Jesus by name in his speech, he makes a very clear reference to him all throughout. In verse 35 it's the person and work of the Messiah described as the ruler, the prince of Israel and the deliverer of those in bondage. In verse 37 he's described---Jesus is---as The Prophet through whom the truth has been made clearly manifest. Jesus said if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. If you've seen me, you've seen perfection in the flesh, because that's who I am. I've come to live the righteousness that you couldn't live. In verse 52 Luke records Stephen's speech. He describes Jesus as The Righteous One. He's the one and only one who has ever kept God's Law. That's great news for us, because each of us have an accounting to give. This is the warning from the pulpit every week, week in and week out. Each of us must stand and give an account, and the standard is the righteousness of Almighty God, and we don't meet that standard. So we must have the righteousness of Christ, and he offers it to us freely. We receive it by faith. Stephen rested in the righteousness of Christ. He was keenly aware of his own unrighteousness. That's why his proclamation was that of the apostles before him. He called people to repent, and he offered to them forgiveness for sins in the name of the Righteous One, Jesus of Nazareth.

So with the knowledge of a completely fulfilled covenant and resting in the righteousness, the gift of another, Stephen's life also reflects for us---and how he faced death also reflects for us---that he received with contentment all that the sovereign and loving God had ordained for him. How hard is that to even comprehend---in the midst of our circumstance, in the midst of life, in the midst of the news of the passing of a loved one---to receive with contentment all that our sovereign God ordains. The Sanhedrin was so enraged at Stephen's indictment of them that they rushed to kill him. They rushed to shut him up forever. They cannot stand having this religion of theirs challenged. He will cease and desist immediately, by any means necessary.

There's no evidence whatsoever to conclude that this was a lawful Jewish execution. They had such a thing. The Mishnah Sanhedrin states that a capital offense---blasphemy of God, blasphemy of Moses was a capital offense---a capital offense could be acquitted on the same day, but it could not be enacted on the

same day. It could be enacted only after a night of rest and reflection. So this is not a lawful verdict. It's also taking place in a Roman province, where a Roman governor had to give his confirmation of the verdict before stoning could take place. This is all together wrong. It's not a lawful execution under Jewish law, but rather it's a rage-filled retaliation to quiet one who was speaking to their hearts.

That's what's going on here, even though we now know Stephen was preaching the truth with concern for their souls. He was in the right. Everything about this is wrong. Everything about this smacks of unfair. Everything about this cries, "Foul!!" If we were advising Stephen, what would we be saying.....*you know, you need to register an appeal, man. You've got to get them to pull back.* If we were in this situation would we quickly try to adjust our message? Would we try to somehow do the two-step and dodge and weave and bob and figure out what they want to hear so that they're not going to continue to rush at us? It's the fear of every preacher. You have everything together in your sermon. All the illustrations just spot on, the textual criticism, everything you've done, and you finish that message and the crowd rushes at you. And what you want to hear is *Good job, Preacher.* What he hears is: To death. Stephen does not shrink back. He doesn't bob and weave. He doesn't try to figure out how to change the message. Why would he? Why would he change this message? This message is what has secured his soul for all eternity as a precious child of the living God.

Put yourself in this situation. I don't know if you've ever read any information about a stoning. It is a violent way to die. It is a prolonged way to die. Some of the stones are big. Some of the stones are small. There's mocking. There's a crowd gathered around one. Nobody stands in front of a stoning victim and tries to take a stone on their behalf. You're outnumbered. You're all isolated. And you are being killed in a systematic and brutal way. And Luke records for us that in the midst of the stoning, when the Jews rushed at him to take him by force, Stephen has this incredible blessing. He sees the face of his Savior.

When I was ten years old I had the gift of a basketball for my birthday. (I've told this story before at Upward camp.) And I went up the street where there was a basketball hoop hooked to the telephone pole in the little section that used to be a dead end---and now there's thirteen houses back there. I went up there just to shoot baskets with my new basketball. And three older kids from my elementary school came out of the woods on the pathway, and they wanted my basketball. They punched me in the face, one of them, and they punched me in the stomach, the other, to get my ball, and they got it. Isolated, all alone, I looked around desperately for a familiar face, someone to help, to come to my rescue, to my aid. And I saw my older brother coming up from our house. His face was all I needed to see. I don't know if they saw him or not, but they let the ball dribble and bounce and roll away, and they went on their way.

This was Stephen---the blessing of God. Do you see it here? In the midst of a violent, brutal act God peels back heaven and he shows the face of Jesus, Stephen's Savior, to Stephen. And he says, 'Behold. I see the Son of Man.' Stephen is given a wonderful privilege that few, if any, have in this life. The Scriptures only record a couple of encounters with the living God. And Stephen is one of them.

So Stephen is receiving the circumstances---this is the thing that gets me---with contentment. He's at peace. He's at a peace like we sing about, that passes understanding. And he's there because he knows the position of Christ, and he knows the power of Christ, and he is intimately familiar with person of Christ. There's three statements that Stephen makes after his speech is finished. These three statements give us this insight into Stephen's contentment.

He sees and knows the position of Christ. Stephen says---in the midst of his stoning he says, 'Behold, I see the heavens have opened up, and the Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God.' The Son of Man. This was Jesus' favorite designation for himself in his earthly ministry. He was called other things by other people, but when he referred to himself he liked the designator 'Son of Man.' "The Son of Man," he said in Mark 10, "did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." When he stood before the trial---the mockery of a trial---before he was crucified, Jesus said there will be a day, and

it's soon, when you'll see the Son of Man coming in power. Because Jesus, in his earthly ministry, in order to give those with ears to hear, he wanted to make a connection for them that he was the one described in Daniel Chapter 7. In Daniel Chapter 7 you see this picture. The Ancient of Days---that's a designator for God Almighty---is seated on his throne. The Ancient of Days has now quelled every earthly power. There is no dominion that rivals his own. The Ancient of Days then brings one, the Son of Man. And to the Son of Man, Daniel 7:13-14 record, that to the Son of Man is given him the right to reign and to have dominion over all peoples, all nations, all languages, and a kingdom that will never end. You see, Stephen looks up and he sees the Son of Man. And there is no Sanhedrin, there is no circumstance, there is no person on earth, there is no power on earth or under the earth that has dominion over his Lord. And Stephen knows it. That's why when the circumstances come his way that are adverse and Stephen is in the middle of being stoned to death, he's at peace. This is too much to handle. Stephen is content in Christ because Christ reigns supreme.

And then Stephen remains content in Christ still because he knows the power of Christ. Look at the second statement he makes. "As they were stoning Stephen," verse 59 says, "Stephen called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'" There's only one who has dominion over the souls of man. It's the one who purchased the souls on the cross upon which the Prince of Glory died. He cries out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Stephen knows the power of the risen Christ. He knows that he's secure. It's like that thief expressing faith on the cross next to Christ. 'Lord, when you come into your kingdom, remember me.' Stephen knew that Jesus is the power. He lived believing it, and he was going to die believing it. The resurrected Christ, when John saw him on the island Patmos, he says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come. I am the Almighty." And Stephen knew that. Christ, Lord Jesus---only you can receive my spirit, because you control, you hold, in your precious grip of grace, my eternal soul.

Stephen was content also during the violent stoning because he was intimately familiar with the person of Christ. Look at that third statement that he makes. In verse 60: "And falling to his knees---in the midst of being killed---he cries out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" And after this, Luke records, he fell asleep. That's a New Testament way to say 'He died.' Because for the believer it's a temporary time. You pass from....Paul says to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord, but we eagerly await the resurrection of our bodies where body will be once again united to soul and forever we will dwell with him in a new heaven and a new earth, the new Jerusalem. Stephen was bearing the fruit of a life lived in intimate relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. When circumstances come your way and my way whatever gets jostled in us, whatever is full in here comes spilling out of here. That's what was happening. Jesus said out of the fullness of your heart your mouth speaks.

Put yourself in this situation if you can with your imagination for just a minute. There is no pretense in Stephen. Let me say a couple of really good things to be remembered for posterity's sake. Let me just, let me gin up something that I think will be remembered. He is being brutally killed. His blood is pouring down from the wounds. But what Stephen says is what's in there. And what's in there is the person of Jesus Christ. We've heard these similar words like this before. When Jesus hung on the cross for your sins and mine he said, 'Into thy hands I commit my spirit.' When he looked at the crowd mocking him and spitting on him, wagging their heads in mockery, he said, 'Father, forgive them, they do not know what they're doing.' Do you see what's going on here? Stephen was walking with Jesus. He was intimate with the person and the work of Jesus. Remember the promise Jesus gives to all of us in John 15: Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. That's what was happening. We're seeing the fruit of someone who was walking with Christ by faith.

You see, nestled in the grand story of God's redemption is this little story of Stephen. Stephen's life, Stephen's death. Nestled in the grand story of God's redemption is another little story that's being birthed here. There was a young man named Saul who approved of the execution. We'll hear about him in just a bit in the Book of Acts, because that's what God does. God is at work to glorify himself, to bring

redemption to his people. Faith in Christ is reflected in how we live our life, but we also see that faith in Christ is revealed in how we face our death. Stephen was an ordinary man gripped by the extraordinary grace of a God who saves the ungodly, like us. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints, Psalm 116:50. It's precious to God when his saints die content in him. Remember the prophet Isaiah. The suffering Messiah would see his work and he would be satisfied. He would see the accomplishment of his death, and he would be satisfied in that.

We have only one recorded instance of Jesus, who was at the right hand of God the Father, actually standing in that position, and this is it. The heavens opened up and Stephen sees the Son of Man, who has all dominion, all power, all authority, and he's standing and rejoicing in a life satisfied in Christ. That's what's going on here.

Nestled in God's grand story of redemption is your story and my story, as well. It's for us to grab ahold of, to receive by faith, to rejoice in---to rejoice in a completed covenant on our behalf, to rest in a righteousness that we can't earn, we can't pay back and it's been given to us, and to receive---to receive with contentment everything that our sovereign God brings our way, because that's how he's shaping us to be like Christ. Jesus knows our frame. We've read from Psalm 103 already. He knows our frame and so before he gave his life as a sacrifice for us he gave us a tangible reminder of his sacrifice on our behalf.

On the night in which God in the flesh was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread with his disciples and he broke it. And he held it up and he instituted that bread for all of his people to see that as his body given in their place. And then he took a cup, and the cup was filled with wine, and he offered that to them. And he instituted that and he said that this cup is the new covenant in my blood. I'm shedding that blood for your sins, because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness for sins. So Jesus did that, knowing that two thousand years later you and I---weary, weak, wounded sinners---would need a reminder of the power and the position and the person who loved you and gave himself for you. That's what this table is all about.

This table is for all of those who have made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. What that means is that you've acknowledged before the world that you are a despicable, black-hearted sinner---you freely admit that, because your only hope is Jesus Christ and Christ alone. You've made that known. You've received the mark of the covenant. You've been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This table is for those who are in humble reliance on his grace, believing that he is their only hope to clean the pollution and to cleanse the guilt of our sin. This table, this meal is the reminder that one day we'll all be, believer, seated at the table where our faith will then be sight. We'll see him face to face. We will enjoy the physical, real presence of the living God. Right now we enjoy his presence by faith. So this meal this table is for you, beloved.

But my responsibility as a minister is to warn you this table is not for you if that description does not fit you. It's not because we're trying to be secret or private. It's because these are not your elements. But Jesus is for you. Today, if that is not your expression of faith, it can be. To see Jesus, to see Jesus as the friend of sinners, to see Jesus as a sacrifice for you. Admit it, repent of your sin, and plead with him for forgiveness. He can be your Savior, as well.

Let's pray together, and then let's come to the table and celebrate. Lord, we do pray that you help us now. As we've heard, you went and you suffered in our place to prepare a place of safety for us. We are satisfied. We are safe and satisfied in you. Help us, then, Lord, to celebrate this meal and to renew our satisfaction in you alone. I pray, Lord, that you would accomplish this, as only your Holy Spirit at work in the lives of your people can do. We ask that in the name that is above every name, even Jesus our Lord. Amen.