

OBC Sermon – June 26, 2016

Acts 6 to 8:1 – something to die for

Slide 1 - Today we are continuing our series on Acts by looking at chapter 6 to the beginning of chapter 8, which deals with the story of Stephen, who is the first Christian martyr, the first person to be killed because he is a follower of Jesus. The first but certainly not the last. This is a challenging topic... so today we are going to look at the story of Stephen and what happens to him – we are going to try to imagine what it must have been like for the early followers of Jesus, and we are going to ask the difficult questions, what do we do with Stephen's story? What does it say to us today, followers of Jesus living in a different context, 2000 years later? I think the most important thing we need to do with this story is ask, what do we believe about persecution and suffering, both in our own lives and in the wider, global church. So let's look at the story...

Slide 2 - Read Chapter 6: 1- 8 – In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Slide 3 ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

What would it have been like to be a part of the early beginnings of the church? Imagine the situation – we see the early church sorting things out, meeting together and discussing how

they going to organise themselves... working together so they can both serve the poor and teach the word.

Things are going well... the number of disciples is increasing, the word is spreading, the church is growing rapidly, a large number of priests are becoming obedient to the faith... this is an exciting time. How amazing it must have been to be a part of this! And how exciting would it also be to rub shoulders with men like Stephen... Luke, the author of Acts, describes Stephen as a man 'full' – he is full of wisdom, full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of God's grace and full of God's power and from that fullness he performs great wonders and signs among the people. Doesn't he sound incredible? If you had been there, if you were part of this early faith community – surely you would be thinking this guy is going to have an amazing long fruitful ministry serving God. There would be excitement and anticipation. What is God going to do next?

But the story takes a depressing turn... Jesus had promised that his followers would face persecution... and unfortunately it doesn't take long to find them...

Slide 4 - Let's read the next part of the story... v9-15⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹²So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. **Slide 5** ¹³They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Opposition comes in the form of deception – things are done in secret... people are stirred up, lies are told. What a tense and upsetting situation.

What does Stephen do? In the verses that follow he tells them the story of Abraham and Moses. He is one of the first Christian apologists – able to defend his beliefs, using the scriptures that he knows so well... He explains to them that God is not confined to the temple. He says in v48 **Slide 6**

⁴⁸ However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands.

Slide 7 And he finishes with a stern rebuke – v51-53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Wow! Stephen is not only full of wisdom but he is full of courage too...

The reaction of the Sanhedrin is violent and filled with hate... v 54-8:1 – **Slide 8**

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ 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.

8 And Saul approved of their killing him.

What would this be like? How would you feel? Gutted, devastated, questioning, how could this happen, when things were going so well! Would you question God? I know I would – I’d be asking, how could you let this happen? How could you let these evil men have the upper

hand? What a life wasted! What could Stephen have done for the church if only he had lived? What wasted potential! Why? Why? Why?

What questions do stories like this leave you with?

A big one is: Why does God allow suffering and the persecution of believers?

This is not an easy question with an easy, black and white answer, but it is an extremely important question for us to wrestle with, to engage with openly and honestly. And I'm not so sure whether the modern western church has done a good job of helping people develop a theology of suffering.

As a family pastor I am particularly interested in how we pass on faith to our young people, but I'm also very interested about what sort of faith we pass on... as I was thinking about this a couple of things I have read in recent years came back to me... One is a quote I read from Phil Vischer who is the creator of veggie tales, which many of you will be familiar with. Veggie tales went into bankruptcy and was sold off to another company and in an interview he said this.

Slide 9 *I looked back at the previous 10 years and realized I had spent 10 years trying to convince kids to behave Christianly without actually teaching them Christianity. ... Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. It's the Oprah god."*

It is a warm, fuzzy belief in a distant God whose primary goal is our happiness and fulfillment.

This is backed up by research by Dr. Christian Smith. **Slide 10** In his book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith explains his research on the religious views of American teens. He coined the phrase "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" to describe what many people believe about God:

1. *The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.*
2. *God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.*
3. *Good people go to heaven when they die."*

Slide 11 It is Christianity without Christ, which means it is not Christianity at all, but a false religion built on a false gospel. And most American teenagers, including most professing Christians, have unwittingly accepted it as their worldview.

Now, the reason I have shared this with you is what happens to people with this version of Christianity when life happens; when life gets hard, when the pressure goes on for being a Christian, when they suffer, and they don't feel happy?

They walk away, Christianity must be just a fairy tale because God hasn't blessed me by making my life comfortable... I don't feel happy so Jesus isn't real or he doesn't love me. So you see, honestly engaging with the issue of persecution and suffering – with stories like Stephen - is vital for us to have a strong, lifelong, faith, which will weather the inevitable storms of life.

So let's wrestle with the story of Stephen... It is very easy when doing this to give pat, simplistic answers and pretend that God can be understood. He's God – there would be something wrong if we could totally get our heads around him and understand the 'why' of every circumstance. So I apologise if it comes across that way, that's not my intention... suffering is hard, and when you are in the midst of it, it hurts and the last thing you want is for some well meaning but insensitive Christian to quote bible verses at you... I know.

But what I also know is that following Jesus is sometimes hard – but he told us it would be, he hasn't lied to us... we need to know our Bible, just like Stephen did. And when we do, we see that Jesus never promised that life would be easy...

Slide 12 In this world you will have trouble. John 16:33

...the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.
John 16:2

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. John 15:18

Slide 13 God did promise to bless us, but 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.' Matt 5:11

How could this possibly be a blessing? Let's look at Verse 55 again... **Slide 14** "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.” Jesus was there... he didn’t stop Stephen’s death but he was there, helping Stephen to reflect God’s grace and offer his killers’ forgiveness... isn’t this remarkable? there is no way this can be done in our own strength.... The more stressful the situation becomes for S, the closer his tie with God becomes... his face reflects the glory of God... As he faces his death he has a vision of Christ and his words reflect what Jesus said on the cross. God comes with a special revelation of himself to comfort the faithful in their time of deep crisis. It is in the suffering that we see Jesus the most clearly and that is the blessing.

I have heard many people say it was in the struggles of life that God felt the closest... that they were transformed the most...and I have experienced this myself. This is the sort of blessing God promises us, not the removal of pain, not a comfortable, wealthy life. But the possibility of a close intimate relationship with our creator.

I don’t believe he necessarily causes the bad stuff in life, but he often uses it. Now when you are in the pain, you don’t want to even go there... and sometimes we will never see any good from our suffering... We certainly don’t want people to tell us this, we need to discover it for ourselves. But God can use the bad, for good and we see this in the story of Stephen.

Stephen is like Joseph in Genesis, who was able to say to the brothers who hated him, and left him for dead, **Slide 15** ‘you intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ And this is what God is doing here too... using what evil men intended for harm and saving people through it.

Slide 16 Verses 8:1 and 4 - On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

This was a hard time but the scattering of the apostles was used by God to spread the good news, to make Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 come true.

Slide 17^{1:8} But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Luke gives us a glimpse of the victory that God is going to win out of this tragedy. Luke uses the word for scattering seeds... Those who had been scattered preached the word... the people weren't really refugees – they were missionaries.

Stephen's words and his death opened the door for the church's mission to the world... his speech showed the Jewish leaders that worship of God was not to be confined to the temple and his death catapulted missionaries out of Jerusalem. Did they know it at the time? I doubt it...

God can use persecution and suffering to advance the gospel, today. In NZ we enjoy religious freedom... what does persecution look like for us? It's the snide comments, the sarcastic joking, it's the put downs, even from your own family, and that's often where it hurts the most... its going against the peer group and being ostracised because of it... to those who are experiencing this... take heart, remain close to Jesus, respond with Grace to those who hate you, and you never know what seeds God might sow in the hearts of those who are watching you.... Sometimes it is how we react to the hard things in life that speak the most to those around us. As much as it might pain us, God is still more concerned with saving people than giving us a comfortable life.

We are going to finish this morning by thinking about the global church. Because the reality is that many Christians in the world today are losing their lives and are discriminated against for their faith. [Read Slides 18-21](#)

- Christian persecution is any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one's identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death are just a few examples of the persecution they experience on a daily basis.
- According to the World Evangelical Alliance, over 200 million Christians are denied fundamental human rights solely because of their faith.

- ...two thirds of the 2.3 billion Christians in the world today live... in dangerous neighbourhoods. They are often poor. They often belong to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities. And they are often at risk.

What can anyone say about this that doesn't sound trite?? We are going to watch a Video from an organisation called Open Doors, who supports persecuted Christians around the world. At the end of this we are going to have a couple of minutes of silence, for you to think, for you to pray...

In the silence...

...consider do you use the name of God for worthlessness?

...reflect on times of persecution or suffering in your life.

...pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are facing persecution.

Dear Lord – we pray for those Christians around the world who are threatened and persecuted and even killed because of their faith in you. We pray for the violence to stop, we pray that they may experience the religious freedom that we do, we pray that they will know that you are with them... may they too have the Holy Spirit's wisdom, courage, hope and peace. Guide us Lord, on how we can support and encourage them... I pray for those of us today who are suffering... may they too know your presence and comfort and may they know that despite their circumstances, you are still God and you are still in control. We thank you that even though in this world we will face persecution, that you have overcome the world. You have the victory... may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen