

August 16 “He Fell Asleep” (Acts 7:54-8:1)

When **they** 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 clothes 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**. 8:1 And **Saul** was there, giving approval to his death.

This story is like a play. There are 3 groups or individuals in this narrative:

#1.) v54 When **they (Sanhedrin)** heard this, they were furious & gnashed their teeth at him.

#2.) v55-56. But **Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit**,

a.) Just as he was @ the beginning, at the very end, Stephen is **full of the Holy Spirit**. The redundant theme in the Book of Acts & the key to the Christian life is about being filled with the Holy Spirit.

"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." Luke 12:11-12

looked up to heaven & saw the **glory of God**, and **Jesus** standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Note that this verse, while it doesn't use the word "Trinity," illustrates it: The Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus" all appear here. The word "Trinity" never appears in the Bible, but the concept is certainly there. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most confusing doctrines of all. We do not worship three Gods, but One God manifested in three persons. You might want to do some further study on this matter.

b.) **Stephen's focus → God**. He was so "in the Spirit" that he was hardly even aware of what was going on. We used the word "**Ecstasy**" which literally means "to step outside oneself." It is very similar to some other Bible characters: see Isaiah (in Isaiah 6), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1), and John (Revelation 1). Stephen seemed to know what was coming but he looks away from his enemies and saw the glory of God. Stephen is a great illustration of the quote: "*It is better to fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail.*"

What Stephen did is illustrated in Hebrews 12:1-3. Look at Hebrews 11 as a background, paying careful attention to verse 32-40. In Hebrews 11, many of the people are triumphant. In Hebrews 11, many of the people die because of their faith. We are going to see this later in our Acts study. James is martyred; while Peter is released from prison (see Acts 12). We do not know why certain things happen. But we do know that our focus must remain firmly fixed on God.

(Hebrews 12:1-3 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*)

7:56 is the only time in the Bible that Jesus is pictured as standing at the right hand of God. When he said he saw Jesus giving him a standing ovation – it was the tipping point. The Sanhedrin were so outraged by this claim, they went into a frenzy.

v57-58 **Sanhedrin** *At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.*

They covered their ears & started screaming at him. They were totally out of control. There was no due process, no trial, and no order. They shouted (imagine that scene!) to drown out his blasphemy. A riot ensued. They dragged him out of the city & stoned him. It violated both the Roman (a Roman Governor had to confirm a death sentence) & Jewish law (they had to wait a day after a trial + they had Rabbinic regulations on how you were supposed to go about it). This was a mad dash to eliminate this voice from their presence. It was nothing but a mob lynching. They were continuing the cycle of abuse that Stephen (and Jesus) had confronted them with. Their forefathers had tried this with the prophetic voices, they did this to Jesus, and now they are going to kill Stephen. They had what we might call a “Toxic Faith.” They were so focused on the Law that they missed the people. One of the best books I’ve ever read is entitled, [Leadership and Self-Deception](#). While it is a “business” book – it really describes the Christian gospel. The Christian message is always offensive to us in our sinful, natural state. They were told the truth but they didn’t want to hear that.

v59 **Stephen** *“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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.* “Jesus receive my spirit” was in present tense, meaning he might have kept saying it over & over. As he was hit with rocks over & over, he kept giving himself to God. Psalms 31:5 “Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.”

a.) Stephen **Prayed** (for himself). He was so focused upon God that he turned in his deepest need to God. This was a natural development of the life he had been living. It was who he was, anyway. He was a man given to God. He did this daily anyway. This was not an abnormal, “fox-hole” religion – this was an every day practice for Stephen.

b.) Stephen prayed for **their forgiveness**. As they were stoning him, he began praying like Jesus had upon the cross. He prayed for their **forgiveness**. Knowing he was forgiven, now he’s willing to forgive others who are taking his very life. Yet...he knew they really weren’t taking his life. Which concept is harder to believe: “That he was praying...or that he was praying for them to be forgiven?” Undoubtedly, it’s the latter!

c.) **“He fell asleep.”** This is the Christian metaphor for death. 1 Corinthians 15:51

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed”

What’s your anxiety about dying? Let’s switch metaphors. Tonight when we fall asleep we’re not going to die – sleep is merely a temporary state. It’s hard to sleep if we’re stressed or anxious or worried or angry or bitter. But when we are at peace, we sleep well. (A good question to ask: “How am I sleeping?” It may be an indication of our emotional and spiritual life.)

#3.)8:1 **Saul**. *Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

This is the very 1st time we meet him in Acts. Note the link of Stephen with Jesus + a link of Stephen with Saul. Stephen is THE link between the two greatest figures in the New Testament. Yet, Stephen is somewhat an obscure figure in the minds of Christians. His name appears only 11 times in the New Testament (all in the Book of Acts). But he was an enormously important person. Without Stephen, would we have had Paul? Saul the persecutor soon becomes the **anti-Christ** of his day. Then he is gloriously converted. Undoubtedly, Paul could never get it out of his mind that he had been somewhat responsible for Stephen’s death (even if he didn’t throw the rocks, he held the coats of those who did). Remember that **Stephen died** never knowing the impact of his life.

In conclusion, I think it’s important to recognize that how we live prepares us for how we die.

Romans 8:35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are **more than conquerors** through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The **same Holy Spirit** that empowered Stephen is in you and me! We think, "Well, that was Stephen, that wasn't really for me." But the Holy Spirit has not changed one iota since the time of Jesus, Peter, Stephen, and Paul. It becomes a matter of our opening our hearts to the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Stephen is a great model of ministry.

It also makes us consider: "What am I giving my life for?" We are all going to die. A good question to ask ourselves is: "Am I earthbound in my existence?" Jesus did not commend those who had such a worldview:

Luke 12:16-21 *And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' 18 "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" 20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' 21 "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."*

22 Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

27 "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! 29 And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30 For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

*32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your **treasure** is, there your **heart** will be also.*

What's in your heart? What's your treasure? For Ananias and Sapphira, the answer was plain (their hearts were full of Satan). For the Sanhedrin the answer was plain (jealousy and unbelief). But for Stephen, his heart was full of the Holy Spirit. That is the model for the Christian life. How are you doing?