

Sermon Series Title: "Church Beginnings"

Sermon Series Summary: From now until around Easter, we will be in the book of Acts, covering chapters 1-12. After the Ascension of Jesus Christ, we see the NT church being born by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through this series, we see the church being built, the kingdom going forth, and the gospel being proclaimed.

"We are in our "Church Beginnings" sermon series, and through this series, we're going to see that we need to know where we come from to know who we are now and to know who we will become in the future."

Call: Deuteronomy 32:43

Text: Acts 7:54-8:4

Title: "The Sacrifice of Stephen"

Next Week's Call: Judges 5:2

Next Week's Text: Acts 8:9-25

Next Week's Title: "The Confusion of Simon"

Future Calls: Judges 5:2, 3, 4-5, 31, 2 Samuel 2:1-2, 3, 4, 7, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23-25, 26-27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 36, 40-43, 47, 50-51

Future Titles: "The Mission of Philip" (Acts 8:4-8, 26-40), "The Conversion of Paul" (Acts 9:1-19a), "The Ministry of Paul" (Acts 9:19b-25), "Dwelling in Flesh" (Daniel 2:8-11)

Fallen Condition Focus: The gospel brings forth persecution and suffering.

Christ redeeming FCF: God uses it for His glory and purposes, fully found on and displayed through the cross.

Proposition: "The sovereignty of God and the hope in Christ give us the boldness to share the gospel with the world."

Summary: Our passage starts off with the stoning of Stephen after his fearless sermon. In it, we see Stephen witnessing the glory of Christ as he goes home to heaven. This martyrdom sparks even greater and more intense persecution against the church. But this is all under God's sovereignty as the church is sent out and the seeds of the gospel are planted.

Reflective Questions:

1. How does the death of Stephen move you? What can we learn from it?
2. What does our passage teach us about God's sovereignty in suffering?

I. Introduction

- A. Hook- first martyr for Jesus in the early church; martyr meaning witness
- B. Transition- Stephen was witnessing, and he was able to witness the heavenly court.
- C. Proposition
- D. Points

II. The Sacrifice of Stephen (vv. 54-60)

- A. Heard these things- Stephen's sermon rebuking their pride and calling them to Christ
 1. Are enraged and grind their teeth at them- sign of rage and fury
 2. Cut to the heart- some translations- similar description as 2:37 but different effect; Word hardens or softens; it does not come back void
- B. Stephen gazes into heaven and sees the glory of God in Jesus
 1. Instead of looking at his oppressors, he looks to God.
 2. Vision like 2 Kings 6 for Stephen to see
 3. Jesus is standing even though he is described as sitting in other passages (Heb 1:3, 12:2).
 4. Standing to receive Stephen or standing for Stephen's defense (Augustine).
 5. For those in Christ, this will be our vision after we pass away, if not before.
- C. The crowd stops their ears and rush together at him.
- D. They cast him out and stone him with witnesses laying down garments.
 1. Stoning for false prophets (Deut 13) only for false gods and not allowed under Roman rule
 2. Stephen is a young man. This must have been a horrific sight.
 3. Lay garments before Saul- respected and tasked with persecuting the church
- E. Stephen prays Jesus' prayers on the cross- "Receive my spirit" and "Do not hold this sin against them."
- F. Stephen falls asleep- death is like sleep since we will be resurrected. Not unconscious, but bodies will be in the grave while our souls will be in heaven.

III. The Scattering of the Church (vv. 1-4)

- A. Saul approves the execution.
- B. Stephen's death sparks a great persecution against the church.

1. Feel freer and bolder to attack the church
- C. They are scattered all the way out to Samaria, except the apostles.
 1. It's ok to avoid persecution and danger... but it's not ok to stop preaching (v. 4).
 2. Apostles don't leave until it is clear for them to leave the Jerusalem church.
 3. They are fulfilling Jesus' commission to be witnesses to Judea, Samaria, and all the earth. First by miracles in ch. 5, then by persecution in ch. 7.
- D. Devout men bury Stephen, risking their lives; making great lamentation over him.
 1. It's ok to be sad and to mourn even though we have heavenly hope.
- E. Saul is ravaging the church- dragging men and women and committing them to prison.

IV. The Sovereignty of God

- A. We see that God is sovereign even through brokenness and sin.
- B. We see that God uses the persecution of the church for the gospel to go forth. Would the church have gone into Samaria without persecution? We don't know. But this was part of God's plan.
- C. Even something as horrific as the death of Stephen is used to plant the seeds of the gospel. Paul talks about this later in his ministry (Acts 22), and we see themes of Stephen's death in his letters (completed work in us- Phil 1:6, God's sovereignty- Rom 8:28, More than conquerors though we are sheep to be slaughtered- Rom 8:36-39, intercession for others- Rom 9:3).
- D. If Jesus standing is the heavenly trial for every person, we see God is sovereign even that. Jesus is our advocate and our defense. That is the true trial that matters, more than ones on earth.
- E. How can we know that God is sovereign even through broken and difficult circumstances? How can we have faith in the true trial and court of heaven?
 1. We look at the ultimate martyr... the ultimate persecuted one. We see themes of His death in our passage as Stephen prays Jesus' words on the cross... and we see God's answer in Paul.
 2. The sinless Son of God dying through the unjust cross for our sins is the worst event in history, and yet, God used it for His purposes and the good of the world.
 3. We can be assured that Jesus will is our defense, because He took on all the judgment for our sin on the cross.