

Stephen's Gospel: Prosperity and Passion?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER [a]

May 12, 2017

ACTS 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. ... ^{7:2} And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me.

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." ⁵⁴ **Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at [Stephen].** ⁵⁵ **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.** ⁵⁶ **And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."** ⁵⁷ **But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.** ⁵⁸ **Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.** ⁵⁹ **And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** ⁶⁰ **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.**

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

In the book of Acts, Luke shows us the Gospel going out into our world. Jesus has ascended to Heaven, he has sent out his Apostles to build up the Church, and we are given to see how that works.

The Church will be built up by the preaching of Christ crucified, by the baptism of sinners into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, by the distributing of the Lord's Body and Blood to sinners for the purging of all sin, by Christians speaking to one another to build up each other in the Word of life—in short, the Lord will build up his Church by the Gospel, by the good news of the sinner freely justified by the blood of Jesus.

But what will this actually look like in real time?

Because, the Lord is building up his Church in our own generation, too. When we see a world in travail, when we see friends in distress, or some trying to cover up their shame, when we see loved ones going day to day in doubt about how they stand before the face of God, what are we given to say to them?

What is the Gospel of Jesus to a man in trouble at his job, to a woman seeing her marriage unravel, to a child who unable to meet expectations? What are we to say to someone in pain because a loved one has left the Church, or in grief having lost someone dear?

What do we say to bring comfort, to give encouragement to one who is treasured by Christ Jesus? What do we say to give the kind invitation to a sinner to hear the Word of Jesus, to receive the gifts of his Sacraments, to hold onto the doctrine he gave to the Church by the Apostles—how are we to proclaim this Christ Jesus and his gifts to those in our world?

And we can be sure that to any sinner, to any person desperate for relief, we are given to say nothing that we could not say also to Stephen as he is being killed with stones.

Because, we will be tempted to speak to people a Jesus who will bring happiness and prosperity. We will be tempted to teach a Gospel that shows how to live a passionate Christian life. We will want to teach a doctrine that leads people into a successful Christian walk with Jesus.

But what of that would have made any sense at all to St. Stephen?

“Stephen, you are being stoned to death, let me tell you how Jesus wants to make you prosper.”

Or, “Stephen, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are murderously angry at you because you have been preaching the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, you have been freeing up sinners from their guilt, you have been going into homes and giving the comfort of the Gospel, so in their anger they are killing you, so, Stephen, let me tell you how to live a passionate Christian life.”

Or, “Stephen, things don’t seem to be going well for you, so as you’re having rocks thrown at you, let me tell you how to live a victorious life in Christ, let me tell you the principles of how to pray more, let me tell, you, Stephen, how to be led into a deeper relationship with Christ.”

And then when the last rock hits, and Stephen dies, would we count ourselves faithful because, as he was dying, we were giving Stephen laws and principles and methods of how to be a passionate Christian?

There is only one Gospel for Stephen to hear. It is the same Gospel Stephen has been preaching, the same Gospel for which he is now being stoned to death.

It is the Gospel that Stephen would have heard more than once from the Apostle Peter. When Peter had told the people that they were guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and when they then asked Peter, “What then shall we do?”, Peter said,

“Repent and be baptized every one of you into the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

“For the promise,” said Peter, that is, the promise of Baptism, **“is to you and your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”** [Acts 2:38]

How many times Stephen would’ve heard Peter speak that Gospel to sinners.

Repent—that is, you are guilty before the face of God, you are covered in shame, now hear the call of God, hear the invitation of the Gospel, and be turned back to God in Christ Jesus.

Be baptized—that is, you can in no way cleanse yourself, you can in no way bring your name into honor, but be baptized into the name of Christ Jesus, and now, having your sins forgiven in Baptism, bearing the Name he gives in baptism, the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, you live in honor, you live in eternal life.

How many times Stephen would've heard this Gospel from the lips of Peter. And how many times would Stephen have brought this Gospel into the homes of those in need of relief from guilt.

Would we speak any other Gospel to Stephen? Would we ever want to speak any other Gospel to someone who is hurting, to a sinner in despair? More to the point, when we know the sin bringing travail to our own consciences, when we know the pain wearing us down in our own lives, when we know the futility we bring ourselves into by using worthless human efforts to rescue from guilt, would we ever want to hear any other Gospel, any other doctrine, ourselves?

As Stephen is being stoned to death, we would not want to give him a false Gospel of how it is now time for him to start living the prosperous Christian life. But we could rejoice in being given to say to him, *Stephen, I don't know what the Lord has for you, I don't know how this will end; I hope this is not unto death, but nevertheless, even if you are to die at the hands of teachers of the Law with rocks, even then and especially then, you are to know that you belong to the Lord of life, to Christ Jesus, that your sin is forgiven, and you stand in honor at the face of God.*

As Stephen is being stoned, we would not want to spend our time weaving for him a false doctrine of how to live as a passionate Christian or how to have just a closer walk with God. But we would rejoice in speaking to him of his Baptism, in extolling the promise given by the holy Name, we would rejoice in saying to him, *Stephen, though I hope this stoning is brought to an end with no harm to you, nevertheless, even if the Lord honors you with martyrdom, even then, especially then, you may know that you belong to Jesus, that he has bound himself to you in Baptism, that he is with you in your suffering, and he has brought your name, Stephen, in honor to his Father in Heaven.*

Stephen, as he was dying at the hands of the teachers of the Law, was given a view of the throne in Heaven. This is an honor given to the prophets, and later it will be given to the Apostle Paul.

As he looks into that courtroom of Heaven, as he, a sinner, stands at the face of God, Stephen says holy words, words which Jesus speaks to his Father in Heaven, and which Jesus then has proclaimed on Earth. The words Jesus speaks in Heaven to his Father are words bringing you and me and our children into eternal life. They are the words, **Father, forgive them**. And those are the words Jesus then brings to us on Earth in the Gospel, when he says to us, **I forgive you all your sin**.

As he looks into that courtroom of Heaven, Stephen speaks the holy words. Acts 7:58:

⁵⁸ **Then they cast [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.** ⁵⁹ **And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."** ⁶⁰ **And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."**

No holier words have ever been spoken on Earth: **Lord, do not hold this sin against them**.

What are we given to say to the sinner? To any hurting person, to any person desperate for relief? We speak to them no empty promise of prosperity or of a passionate Christian life. For our Lord Jesus did not give himself on the cross for such emptiness. We speak to them nothing we could not say to St. Stephen, even as he is being killed with stones.

We speak to them the same doctrine Stephen heard from the Apostle Peter, the same Gospel Stephen spoke to sinners in their own homes, the same word we ourselves must hear daily to cleanse us of our sins. We speak to them the same word Jesus speaks to his Father on our behalf, the same word that stands us at the face of God in honor and peace; we speak to them the same word by which we pray for them, **Lord, forgive them of all sin**.

It is in that intercession to the throne in Heaven, and in that word from Heaven being spoken on Earth in the Gospel, that the Lord is justifying sinners and gathering into his Church.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.