

Text: Acts 7:54-8:1

Title: “An Unstoppable Life” Pt.2

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION – The internet and social media lit up a couple of weeks ago over a picture of this dress. The controversy revolves around the colors of this dress. What colors do you see? I see white and gold, but many people see blue and black. Well, as it turns out the color of the dress changes with the perspective. If you look at it from one angle it is white and gold. If you look at it from another angle it appears blue and black.

When it comes to the message of the Gospel, what you see depends on your perspective. Those who first heard the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and received it by faith were transformed. But there were others who heard the message of the Gospel from a different perspective. They saw it as a threat to their religious traditions and they became angry. This is the mob that our friend Stephen encountered in Acts 6-7.

Open your Bibles to Acts 7:54. Stephen is a servant of the church; but he was also a mighty preacher. When he began to speak about Jesus in the Jewish synagogues he was immediately called before the religious authorities. Last week we saw how Stephen was so full of Jesus that they could not withstand his life. He had an unstoppable life. They could not stand up against the power of his life and his message. So Stephen steps up and preaches one of the most powerful messages in the Bible. But Stephen’s message was an offense to the Jews, and he would pay the price for his faithfulness. Yet even at that, his was an unstoppable life. Read Acts 7:54-8:1.

Stephen had an amazing perspective as he faced this furious mob.

Acts 7:55 - 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.

Last week we saw the fullness of Stephen’s life. He was full of Jesus in his life ... and he was full of Jesus in his death. I told you last week that to be “full” in the biblical sense means to be occupied with something or someone. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, faith, grace and power. He was completely occupied with Jesus. In fact, every statement of Stephen that we have recorded here in this last part of Acts 7 was either spoken about Christ or spoken to Christ. You see, cut Stephen and he bleeds Jesus. What do you bleed when you're cut? What (or who) occupies your life?

And it wasn’t just that Stephen was faithful to God in the last hours of his life. The big thing is that God was faithful to Stephen in the last hours of his life. God’s response to Stephen is to fill him with the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what Peter meant when he said...

1 Peter 4:14 - If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

We saw last week that Stephen’s enemies were snarling like wild animals, overcome with rage. But Stephen had the face of an angel. Now we understand why. His face was simply reflecting the glory of God that he saw as he looked to Jesus.

Stephen's life was unstoppable, even by death. When that last stone struck his body and the last breath left his lungs and the last brain wave coursed through his brain, Stephen was more alive than ever. So what gave Him such victory in that dark hour? It was his vision of Christ. To have a life that is unstoppable, even by death, you need a vision of...

1. **THE GLORY OF CHRIST** (Acts 7:55-56)

Acts 7:56 - "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen is face to face with death and in that hour he sees Christ more clearly than he's ever seen him.

QUOTE: I love what John Piper says about this: "(Death) raises its ugly head and threatens to take away from us all the pleasures of bright spring mornings and buds on the trees and warmth on the skin and the colors of fall and the stars in the night sky, but instead it opens the window of heaven and reveals the glory of God. It threatens to take away our most precious relationships, but instead it shows Jesus standing to receive us. I don't mean that every believer will get the same vision of glory and of Jesus that Stephen got. But I do mean that this is the way the Holy Spirit comforts us when we are dying, and robs death of its power. One way or another he makes death a window to the glory of God and to Jesus. And for those who love Jesus more than anyone and long for the glory of God more than anything the sting of death is gone and the power of death is broken."

Notice that Stephen saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. Most other references to Christ at the right hand of God have Him seated there. Here he's standing. We're not given an explanation, but many scholars believe that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God as an advocate for Stephen before the Father, and to welcome the first follower to die for the sake of Christ.

In the last minutes of his life Stephen is testifying to the exaltation of Christ. He proclaimed that Jesus, the Son of Man, was standing at the right hand of God. What a witness! This Jesus whom they had crucified is alive and more than that has been exalted to the highest place in all of the universe.

Jesus promised His followers...

Matthew 10:32-33 (NASB) - "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."

This means that if you stand for Jesus He will stand up for you.

Acts 7:57 - At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,

Acts 7:58 - 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.

Stoning was (and still is in some parts of the world) a method of execution where a group throws stones or rocks at the person they want to execute. In the OT stoning a person was stoned to death for crimes such as murder, blasphemy or apostasy. And because the Jewish leaders accused Stephen of blasphemy when he preached about Jesus, they thought stoning was justified. It was a horrific way to die. Beheading is a quick death; stoning is a slow death. Some descriptions say that those doing the stoning should not use stones that were so large that one or two strikes would kill the person immediately. They wanted the suffering to be prolonged. Nor were the stones to be so small that they did not inflict harm.

And this is the price Stephen paid for faithfulness to Christ. But as brutal as his execution was, it could not stop his life because he had a vision of the glory of Christ. But also, to have a life that is unstoppable, even by death, you need a vision of...

2. THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST (Acts 7:59)

Acts 7:59 - While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Maybe those words sound familiar to you. You see, Stephen lived like Jesus lived and he died like Jesus died. He was occupied with Jesus in his death. You see, he learned from Jesus how to die. Luke, the author of Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke. There he records the words of Jesus on the Cross:

Luke 23:46 - Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Stephen’s prayer is very similar to Jesus’ prayer. Jesus prayed to the Father. Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” In praying this Stephen is showing that there’s no place he would rather be than in the presence of Jesus. Physical death couldn’t stop Stephen’s life.

ILLUSTRATION – Someone has described it this way. Imagine that you are dying inside a cabin in the woods. The door that is before you is death and step by step you are moving toward that door. Suddenly the door opens and you see a huge, dangerous wolf with its fangs showing and its eyes furious. Your first instinct is to be terrified, but then your eyes are opened. Behind the wolf Jesus is standing, shining like the sun. With a smiling face His arms are stretched out to you. Then you notice that Jesus has in His hand a great chain that is connected to an iron collar on the wolf’s neck. You’re hesitant to keep walking but then the Spirit gives you the strength to put one foot in front of the other. As you take the step through the door out of the cabin you see the wolf opening his mouth to devour you. Then suddenly Jesus, with a mighty tug, hurls the wolf of completely out of sight. And with that you enter into the arms of the Lord of glory.

Romans 8:38-39 - 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.

But Stephen had one more thing to say to Jesus before he died:

Acts 7:60a - Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

To have a life that is unstoppable, even by death, you need a vision of...

3. THE GRACE OF CHRIST (Acts 7:60)

Again, Stephen has learned from Jesus how to die. And he learned from Jesus how to forgive. Luke in his Gospel writes...

Luke 23:34a - Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

We saw back in Acts 6 that Stephen was a man full of grace and power. Grace is giving to others what they don't deserve in the way of forgiveness. So Stephen...

Acts 7:60 - 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.

“He fell asleep...” What a peaceful death in the face of such violence done against him. Stephen's gracious, peaceful faith shines brightly against the hatred and race of those who killed him. Peter tells us this about Christ's peaceful faith in the midst of the sufferings of the crucifixion:

1 Peter 2:23 - When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Listen, the time to forgive is now. Don't go to your grave holding a grudge or an unforgiving spirit against anyone.

Now there's one more thing. You need a vision of...

4. THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST (Acts 8:1)

Now Stephen had no way of knowing this as he died, but we know it through the revelation of Scripture.

Acts 8:1 - And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Just looking at Stephen's death alone we may say, “Yes, he died in a noble way, but after that so what.” But Luke wants us to see more than that. He wants us to see how the death of Stephen played a part in God's great purposes in getting the Gospel to the nations. Spoiler alert here! We'll see later in Acts that this Saul of Tarsus is going to meet Jesus and be gloriously saved. We'll read later in Saul's testimony that God used Stephen's death to bring Saul to Christ. We know him later as the Apostle Paul who would become the greatest missionary in the history of the church. His Spirit-inspired writings will give us a huge part of our New Testament.

Notice what else happened as a result of Stephen's death. Acts 8:1 says his death set off a wave of persecution which forced many believers to leave Jerusalem and scatter to the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. Does that sound familiar? Remember the central verse in Acts is...

Acts 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."

As violent and vicious as Stephen's death was, God used it to force believers to move to other areas where they would become the beginning of the unstoppable witness of the church to the ends of the earth. Otherwise it may have never left Jerusalem.

Just think about how undesirable changes in our lives fit into God's perfect purposes for us and for others. He is orchestrating all the circumstances of your life to bring about His good and glorious purposes for us.

ILLUSTRATION – Last week we received word that one of our administrative assistants, Monica Ward, has cancer. We need to pray for Monica. On Friday Nan and I visited with her. Monica happens to be a cousin to the father of Dr. Kent Brantley, the doctor who courageously fought the Ebola virus and survived. Dr. Brantley, along with his mom and dad were in the room when we stopped by. Kent's mother is a godly woman and she put her hand on Monica's shoulder and said, "God has you here. Trust Him that He knows what He's doing."