

THERE'S GOOD NEWS & BAD NEWS

ACTS 7:54-8:4 JANUARY 8, 2020

Tim and Gerald had been friends as long as they could remember. They bonded over America's favorite pastime, baseball, playing with other neighborhood kids at the local sand lot. Tim could really hit and Gerald threw a mean fastball. Raised in Christian homes, Tim and Gerald would sometimes talk about what heaven would be like. As youngsters, they made a pact, that if one of them died, they'd come back and tell the other what heaven really was like. After years of friendship, playing baseball together in high school and college, Tim's life was cut short. But one day, a few weeks after the funeral, he showed up in Gerald's room. He said, "I'm here to tell you about heaven!" Gerald was excited and said, "Ok, let's hear it!" Tim said, "Well, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that there's baseball in heaven. We've got a great league up here and the games are never rained out." Gerald answered, "That's great! What's the bad news?" "The bad news is that you're pitching this Friday."

Our text tonight is a mix of good news and bad news. The good news is that one of God's children was going into glory to receive his inheritance and be forever with the Lord. The *other* good news was that a new, thrilling era in the life of the Church was beginning as the Gospel spread throughout the nation and into the wider world.

The *bad* news is that Stephen's reward would come by means of his sudden, horrific murder. And the new era of Church history was instigated by violent, unchecked persecution.

In general, it's easier for people to focus on the bad news in life. Around the world, news outlets have become measurably more negative since the 1970s.¹ Happy headlines don't sell papers. But we should notice that, as the bad unfolds, for the Christians in our text, Stephen as an individual and the Church at large scattered out of Jerusalem, the good news was *still good*. And though their circumstances were entirely negative, they were able to continue walking with God in *fullness*, progressing in their relationship with Him and furthering His message of hope to a more and more hostile world.

When we left off, Stephen had just concluded his sermon to the supreme court of Israel. For the Sanhedrin, there was good news and bad news. The good news was that the Messiah had come. The bad news was that they had joined the long tradition of resisting God and had, in fact, killed the Savior of the world.

Acts 7:54 - ⁵⁴When they heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him.

These days, we no longer expect much of our nation's leaders when it comes to civility or decorum, but I doubt any of us can imagine Ruth Bader Ginsburg or John Roberts jumping down from the bench to personally murder a witness in their courtroom. But on that day, the pot of malice boiled over. In an earlier chapter, when the apostles had been in front of this same group, we were told that, even *then*, they were full of this rage toward the Christians. But *that* time cooler heads prevailed, as the Pharisee Gamaliel urged everyone to stay calm. But, not today. Having been cut to the heart by the truth of Stephen's message, they attacked him like wounded animals. In fact, Luke describes them in beastly terms as they scream and run and grind their teeth in a violent frenzy.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/17/steven-pinker-media-negative-news>

In contrast, throughout the scene, Stephen will be shockingly calm, almost as if he's unaware of what's going on all around him. That's not true, of course, but take note of how he is described in the last moments of his life. While they're swarming around him, he's serene. While they're foaming at the mouth, he's unruffled. Why? Because his attention is firmly fixed elsewhere.

Acts 7:55-56 - ⁵⁵ But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God's glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, ⁵⁶ "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

As we read these accounts, Luke wants us to know that Stephen was a man *full* of God. It's a term he keeps using again and again. Stephen was *full* of the Spirit. *Full* of faith. *Full* of grace and power. He was brimming with *real* spirituality. That full, robust Christianity not only made him very useful in God's service, it also provided him with great peace and great perspective. It made it possible for him to stand firm as all this came crashing down around him. The peace of God was ruling in his heart and guarding his mind. And so, instead of being distracted by circumstance, he was able to receive a special vision of heaven. And in it he saw Jesus Christ standing beside the throne of God, ready to receive His servant into eternity.

What an amazing image this is. It's a testimony to God's tender, *personal*, care for His people. God loves *you* personally and individually. You're not just another brick in the pile or a number in a ledger. Christ, here, demonstrates that He was personally "taking the time" to watch what was happening. You are not forgotten or unimportant to the Lord. You're an object of His attention, a child He loves.

Stephen called out for anyone there to "look" and see the Lord in His glory. It seems that this vision was just for him, that if any of the others had looked up they would've seen only sky, but his invitation is consistent with the attitude of Christians at the time. Ministry and communion with God and filling with His Spirit was understood to be a universal offer. *All* believers were included in the reservoirs of grace. *All* were invited to be a part of the work. *All* were delivered gifts and callings and opportunities to glorify the King. There was never meant to be more than one class of Christian.

And Stephen's call out here also reinforces what we've seen so many times already - that Christians are meant to be in the *invitation* business. Here, in his last moments, Stephen invites his own killers to turn their eyes upon Jesus. The Church has been commanded by God to appeal to everyone, even our worst enemies. To welcome them and plead with them to join our ranks and be born again.

Acts 7:57-58 - ⁵⁷ Then they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸ They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

If this were an Old Testament story, this is the moment we'd expect God to dramatically act to *rescue* His child. As the chariots rush toward the bank of the Red Sea, the Cloud shoots down to keep them away. But here, it's as if Daniel is thrown in the lions den and the lions tear him apart.

For centuries, Israel was preserved and protected in amazing ways so that the Messiah could be born through the line of Abraham and Judah and David. Now, in the Church age, God's people are sent out to preach the message of redemption in Jesus Christ. And we're sent with power and grace and with the truth on our side. But, in this plan, God allows there to be casualties, at least in the earthly sense. A report conducted in 2019 and reported by various outlets like the BBC, showed that

Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world today, suffering at near ‘genocide levels’ in certain parts of the globe.²

Of course, we know from what God has promised and from the record of history that the Church *thrives* under persecution. Paul, the man who quarterbacked the first violence *against* Christians and who suffered himself in incredible ways would later give us the Biblical perspective on suffering:

Romans 8:18 - ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

Perhaps that’s why, with his dying breaths, Stephen doesn’t pray for rescue, at least not for himself:

Acts 7:59-60 - ⁵⁹ They were stoning Stephen as he called out: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin!” And saying this, he fell asleep.

Again, the way Luke writes, it’s as if Stephen is unencumbered by the proceedings. Did he kneel because of the rocks pelting him or because he *felt* like settling down for one last prayer? The whole thing reads as if he’s just getting ready for a good night’s sleep.

It reminds me a little bit of the climactic scene in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, where Kylo Ren and his evil army confront Luke Skywalker as he stands alone on the battlefield. They unleash all their fury onto him, firing everything they’ve got, but it seems to have no effect. Finally, after one last lightsaber duel, it’s revealed that Luke is there but *not* there. And though the fight results in the end of Luke’s “temporal” life, it’s clear he cannot be defeated by the forces of evil and he dies peacefully.

Stephen’s God is strong enough and loving enough to forgive people who are guilty of even the most heinous sins. And that is good news, indeed. In fact, God was willing to forgive these killers if they would repent. At least one ultimately would, the man Saul, who would become one of the most significant Christians of all time. Augustine said, “The Church owes Paul to [this] prayer of Stephen.”

Stephen had withstood the Sanhedrin, debated in the synagogue. He had passionately held the line on the truth of Jesus Christ, but he was no enemy of the Jews. His last breaths were given in hopes that these people would be saved. His *full* spirituality was not only characterized by effectiveness and strength and peace, but by compassion and divine love for the lost.

Acts 8:1a - Saul agreed with putting him to death.

We’re not sure exactly what Saul’s role was in this scene. Some scholars think that he was simply a bystander who was happy to keep the coats clean while this blasphemer was executed. Others suggest he may have been the legal expert the group referred to in some hasty vote to kill Stephen. What’s clear from what follows and from Paul’s own autobiography is that no one hated Christianity more than he did.

It must have been a strange thing for Dr. Luke to write these words. By the time he sat down to pen this account to Theophilus, Paul was his dear friend, a man who spread the Gospel like no one else, into new cities and new continents. A man who preached to governors and emperors and who wrote

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48146305>

much of the New Testament. A man who forfeited his *own* life, suffering immensely, even being stoned to death *himself*, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Isn't it amazing what God is able to do? Verse 1 here is full of bad news. The bad news was Saul. The *good* news is that in a very short time, Saul would be gone and Paul would be born.

Acts 8:1b - On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.

The killing of Stephen had happened in a frenzy. It was illegal and unjust. But, Rome didn't care. Later, when Paul goes to Ephesus and the local silversmiths start a riot, no one is even killed, but the city clerk freaks out and says, "Hey, everyone needs to cool it or we're going to be charged by the Roman government for this disorderly behavior." And so everyone goes home. Undoubtedly, news of Stephen's slaying would've made its way up the chain to the Romans, but they turned a blind eye to it, which gave the Jews the go-ahead to do *even more* to the Christians. And so, the hunt was on.

The Church in Jerusalem had some incredible fluctuations. They had started as about 120 people. Then suddenly they were 25 times larger! A short time later, they at least doubled again. The bad news is that, just as quickly, they were down to a very small handful. The good news is that the Church was not *destroyed*, just *scattered*. And new congregations would begin to take root throughout Judea and Samaria. Now, multiplication of the saved would increase exponentially.

Acts 8:2 - ² Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him.

It's unclear whether these fellows were *Christians* or if they were earnest *Jews* who did not agree with what was happening to the Christians. Either way, their courage and dignity and willingness to bury Stephen is a good reminder that *devotion* to God is not just something we have, it's something we *express*. Think of these men: They got up from wherever they were and decided, "We're going to bury this man, despite the fact that it may be unpopular or dangerous or disgusting." Hopefully, our own devotion has an ever-growing resume of service to the Lord.

Acts 8:3 - ³ Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.

Saul is contrasted, not as a devout man, but as a destroyer. His friend, Dr. Luke, shows a *bit* of grace here as he reports Saul's brutality against the Church. Paul later fills out the report himself saying he not only dragged innocent people off to prison, but also: "I persecuted [Christians] to the death...in synagogue after synagogue I had those who believed in [Christ] imprisoned and *beaten*...When they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. In all the synagogues I often tried to make them blaspheme...I persecuted God's church to an *extreme* degree and tried to destroy it."

Running for their lives, having been thoroughly *rejected* by the leaders of Israel, the Christians did not lose heart or declare God unfaithful. Rather, this is what happened:

Acts 8:4 - ⁴ So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the message of good news.

It was *still* good news. And they *still* wanted to tell their Jewish countrymen about it. In fact, when Luke circles back to talk about this time period in chapter 11, he writes, "Those who had been

scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the message *to no one except Jews.*”

So, remarkably, despite the violence and the danger and the difficulty, the *message* remained the same and, at first, even the *audience* remained the same. The circumstances had changed, but Christianity had not. They didn't get together and decide to rebrand or change their messaging to be more culturally acceptable. Neither did a powerful wave of persecution lead to a massive falling away. Instead, it was like a wind blowing seeds into far fields, where new crops would grow. The good news propelled the Christians and secured them and filled them, even as exiles on the run.

If you read commentaries, a majority of them will, at this point, suggest or outright declare that it was *God* who sent the persecution in order to get Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria. They say that the Church was in a 'rut' and were 'unwilling to voluntarily obey' what Jesus had told them to do. They say that, had God not compelled them to leave and forced them out by using this violence, many of the Christians 'would never have discovered their gifts.'

What an awful thing to say about our God. For one thing, if He 'had' to send persecution because the Church refused to preach outside of Jerusalem, why is it that none of the *apostles* made their way out? If this was God's way of getting Christians out to fulfill the great commission, why did they not immediately start preaching to the Gentiles? It will be *Peter*, an apostle *still in Jerusalem* who will break that seal in chapter 10.

Imagine a man who has a wife. His hope is that, each day, his wife would have the home cleaned and dinner served by 5 o'clock sharp. And let's say he's asked this of his wife a few times over the years. Well, life happens, and the man finds they're not always eating at the stroke of 5 and there's still some laundry to fold or some dishes in the sink. So, the husband decides he's going to hire a gang to break into the house and beat his wife without mercy. That'll be the motivation she needs to do what he wants her to do! Can you imagine such a man? But how quick many writers are to describe God this way.

Rather, Luke describes in these verses a God of tender care. A God who stands to welcome His servants home. A God who cares about your suffering. A God who is willing to forgive and redeem the *worst* man on the planet and transform him into the greatest Christian of all time. A God whose good is greater than any bad the world can unleash. Filling His people with such love and such grace that they can go happily into exile, with the Gospel on their lips, preaching a message of hope to their enemies. That's the Lord!

In this world we may face bad news. It may be sudden and severe. But the *good* news is that when even those things happen to us, the result can *still* be the advance of the Gospel and the transformation of lives. And we know that we are looking forward to *eternal* glory. Life everlasting in heaven where we will once and for all be separated from sin and suffering and difficulty and opposition and death. So, wherever you've been scattered, be filled by the Holy Spirit, gaze toward heaven, and proclaim the message of good news about the Lord Jesus Christ.