

**Acts 7: 49-60; “Stephen’s Persevering Witness”, Sermon # 35 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on
January 8th, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.**

There really has been much to learn from this sermon of Stephen’s before the council of the Sanhedrim. Most of these men did not really want to hear what Stephen had to say. They had already hardened their hearts against Christ. But Stephen was a man who was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He knew that it would be a great witness to the truth of God’s word if he could review for them what God had done for them as a nation. He would continue to speak to them, as a witness and a testimony to God’s faithfulness to the children of Israel, even though, at many points, they had not been faithful to Him.

It was at the point, in his message to them, where he mentioned that God does not dwell in temples made with human hands, that he could see that they were not receiving what he had to say to them. At that point, he could have just given up and said, “What is the use of speaking with you men?” But instead he went on to tell these men what they were doing. They were cutting themselves off from hearing any more about Christ, and Stephen knew that this would result in their perishing in their sins unless God opened their eyes to their lost condition. And so he faithfully declared the truth to them. He continued telling them what was spiritually happening with them, and also what was spiritually happening with him; all the way to the point where they killed him. This is a good example for all of us to consider, and to learn from.

This morning I want to show you the progression of Stephen’s perseverance in his witness to Christ. For he was faithful to endure to the end, and I pray that each Christian here will have the grace and wisdom from the Spirit to do the same. Let me show you now, the progression of Stephen’s perseverance. 1st of all – He persevered in showing his listeners their awful condition in their unsaved state. 2nd – He persevered in showing them their guiltiness in not keeping God’s holy law. 3rd – He persevered in looking to Christ until his faith became sight. And 4th – He persevered in prayer, both for himself, and for his enemies. As we listen to this message, let us pray to be able to persevere in our own witness to Christ in regard to all the people around us who so desperately need Him.

1st – He persevered in showing his listeners their awful condition in their unsaved state.

Stephen finally is ready to declare to these men their awful condition. He has preached to them in a very sweet and powerful way, but seeing the expressions on their faces, and sensing their continued hostility towards him, he says in verse 51 – “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!” “You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.” Now, we must remember that these men who he was speaking to, were the very men who chose to reject the Lord Jesus Christ when He came and preached to them. They were holding tenaciously to their own false system of legalism. They were spiritually blind in relation to the truth of their own sinfulness. They trusted in their own righteousness and despised those who questioned it. Stephen had been trying to show them that that their form of worship, in the temple service of the ceremonial law, had come to an end with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The accusation that they brought against him was: “We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” But they did not want to hear any more of Stephen’s preaching to them about the truth of these things, and so he confronts them with this very strong statement: “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!”

We need to understand that strong resistance and opposition to the truth of the word of God may at times require those who preach, to call people by the names that describe them best. These men were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. And so, we must ask ourselves, where

did Stephen get this kind of language? The answer is, He got it from God himself. I want you to turn with me over to Exodus 32, verse 6. Moses has been receiving the 10 commandments up on Mt. Sinai from God Himself. But down below the people had convinced Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship. In verse 6 it says: Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go, get down!’” “For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.” “They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them.” “They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’” “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people.’” “Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.” “And I will make of you a great nation.”

Matthew Henry says: “They were stiff-necked, and would not submit their necks to the sweet and easy yoke of God’s government, nor draw in it, but were like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke; or they would not bow their heads, no, not to God himself, would not do obeisance to him, would not humble themselves before him.” “The stiff neck is the same with the hard heart, obstinate and contumacious, and that will not yield – the general character of the Jewish nation.” (end of quote) Contumacious is a word which means stubbornly perverse or rebellious; willfully and obstinately disobedient. Now look over at Exodus 33, verse 1. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’” “And I will send My Angel before you; and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.” “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” “And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments: For the Lord had said to Moses, ‘Say to the children of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people.’”

Now you can see here that at this point in their experience as a nation, that the people, even though they were stiff-necked, were willing to put off their ornaments when they heard of what the Lord thought of them. And God was willing to continue to lead them into the Promised land. There is a willingness in God when He sees outward repentance in a people to bear with them, for a time. But let us also understand, that it was not because of them, but it was because of Moses’ interceding on their behalf. Look over at Exodus 33, verse 12. “Then Moses said to the Lord, ‘See, You say to me, ‘Bring up this people.’” “But You have not let me know whom You will send with me.” “Yet You have said, ‘I know you by name and you also found grace in My sight.’” “Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight.” “And consider that this nation is Your people.” “And He said, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’” “Then he said to Him, ‘If Your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here.’” “For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us?” “So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth.”

Moses had a real relationship with God. He was a man of prayer, not only for himself, but for those whom he was leading. He was an intercessor with God. He prayed much about God’s mercy being shown to this stiff-necked people. He even identified himself with this stiff-necked people when he prayed in Exodus 34: 9 – “Then he said, ‘If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance.’” God showed mercy to this stiff-necked people because it was His purpose to show them mercy at that time, and bring them into the Promised Land, even though many of them died in the wilderness and perished in their sins.

Under the New Covenant, Christ having already come to His own, and His own, not only not receiving Him, but rejecting Him and crucifying Him, the time had come in connection with the gospel being preached to them, for the judgment of judicial blindness to fall upon them for their not being willing to hear and receive the truth. Stephen calls these men – “Uncircumcised of heart and ears”. These men were circumcised in their flesh, and they thought that because of it, that they would continue to be blessed even though they did not have repentant hearts for any of the sinful things that they had done. But they needed to be circumcised in heart and ears if they were to come to have tender and obedient hearts in the sight of God. Listen to what Moses says to them in Deuteronomy 10, verse 12 – “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?” “Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the Lord your God, also the earth with all that is in it.” “The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day.” “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of the your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”

Let us apply this to ourselves in this very important way. The hearing of the word of God, and having the privilege to worship Him in an outward way, will only last for a time. If you do not ask God to do a work of grace in your heart, God will eventually deliver you over to your own native depravity. You will become headstrong against Him. You will be stiff-necked in not receiving the exhortations, applications, and admonitions of the word as it is preached to you, and you will eventually turn against those who preach the word of God to you. This is, spiritually, a very dangerous position to put yourself into. For what you are doing is resisting the Holy Spirit, both in the preaching of the word and in regard to His working the special grace of salvation into your heart. You may find yourself “always resisting the Holy Spirit”, always resisting His striving with you through the preaching of the word and always downplaying or rejecting conviction of sin.

The blessing of common grace, of being able to hear the preaching of the word cannot be underestimated, for it is on this basis that each person will be judged. If you reject common grace, how will you ever receive special grace? It is true that these men laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, when they went to stone Stephen. And he was consenting to their plan of action. But he was eventually given grace because he sinned ignorantly in unbelief. But let each of us pray, not to be resisting the Holy Spirit’s influences, but to receive them all, to the salvation of our souls. Stephen persevered in his showing these men the depravity of their hearts, and we who would share the gospel with others around us, who so desperately need it, must do the same.

2nd – Stephen persevered in showing these men their guiltiness in not keeping God’s holy law.

Verses 52-54 say: “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” “And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.” The thing that Stephen was aiming at with these men was the conviction of sin. Conviction of sin comes to the heart of a person when they realize experientially that they are guilty in the sight of God. They begin to see that they are guilty of certain sins which have been pointed out to them by the preacher, or other people, or their own conscience. This is a great part of what these men were resisting when Stephen said to them: “You are always resisting the Holy Spirit”.

Why do people need to experience conviction of sin? Well, turn with me over to John chapter 16, verse 5. Jesus is speaking to His disciples and He says to them: “But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’” “But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.” “Nevertheless I tell you the truth.” “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” “And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin,

because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father and you see Me no more: of judgment, because ruler of this world is judged.” We see here that conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit. He uses the words of the preacher and impresses upon the heart and mind of the sinner the fact of their guilt. The reason that the Holy Spirit’s work is needed is that people do not by nature believe in Christ, it says here.

Conviction of sin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is designed to lead sinners to that place where they will receive the good news of the gospel and be saved. The fact that this does not happen in every case is not due to any weakness on the part of the Holy Spirit to give power in the New Birth. He certainly can do that. But according to the purpose of God, the perversity of man’s will as being set against their need of Christ must be proven to them. As to whether they will be shown mercy and granted saving grace to believe is all in God’s hands. But they will most certainly be held responsible for rejecting the truth of their guiltiness and the free offers of salvation in Christ. The lesson that we must learn in this regard is that conviction of sin is not saving in itself. It by no means leads to the salvation of a person in every case. A person can be convicted of sin and given illumination by the Spirit upon the truth of their need of Christ, and still not believe or enter in to eternal life.

Listen to John Owen on this. “There is, indeed, an objection of some moment against the ascription of this work unto the energy of the Holy Spirit; for “whereas it is granted that all these things may be wrought in the minds and souls of men, and yet they may come short of the saving grace of God, how can He be thought to be the author of such a work? Shall we say that He designs only a weak and imperfect work upon the hearts of men? or that He deserts and gives over the work of grace which he hath undertaken towards them, as not able to accomplish it?” Ans. 1. In many persons, it may be in the most, who are thus affected, real conversion unto God doth ensue, the Holy Spirit by these preparatory actings making way for the introduction of the new spiritual life into the soul: so they belong unto a work that is perfect in its kind. 2nd - Wherever they fail and come short of what in their own nature they have a tendency unto, it is not from any weakness and imperfection in themselves, but from the sins of them in whom they are wrought. For instance, even common illumination and conviction of sin have, in their own nature, a tendency unto sincere conversion. They have so in the same kind as the law hath to bring us unto Christ. Where this end is not attained, it is always from the interposition of an act of willfulness and stubbornness in those enlightened and convicted. They do not sincerely improve what they have received, and faint not merely for want of strength to proceed, but, by a free act of their own wills, they refuse the grace which is farther tendered unto them in the gospel. This will, and its actual resistance unto the work of the Spirit, God is pleased in some to take away. It is, therefore, of sovereign grace when and where it is removed. But the sin of men and their guilt is in it where it is continued; for no more is required hereunto but that it be voluntary.”

Owen continues – “It is the will, and not power, that gives rectitude or obliquity (deviation from moral rectitude or sound thinking) unto moral actions. 3rd – As we observed before, the Holy Spirit in his whole work is a voluntary agent. He worketh what, when, and how He pleases. No more is required unto His operations, that they may be such as become Him, but these two things: – First, That in themselves they be good and holy. Secondly, That they be effectual as unto the ends whereunto by Him they are designed. That He should always design them to the utmost length of what they have a moral tendency towards, though no real efficiency for, is not required. And these things are found in these operations of the Holy Spirit. They are in their own nature good and holy. Illumination is so; so is conviction and sorrow for sin, with a subsequent change of affections and amendment of life. Again: What He worketh in any of these effectually and infallibly accomplishes the end aimed at; which is no more but that men be enlightened, convinced, humbled, and reformed, wherein he fails not. In these things He is pleased to take on him the management of the law, so to bring the soul into bondage thereby, that it may be stirred up to seek after deliverance; and He is thence actively called the “Spirit of bondage unto fear,” Romans 8: 15.” Works of John Owen, Vol. 3, Book 3, Chapter 2, P. 236, 237

In this particular case, the men who were opposing what Stephen was saying were perversely and stubbornly refusing to consider the fact of their own guilt as it was clearly pointed out to them by

Stephen, and reinforced by the Holy Spirit's powerful working. Their reaction of anger was not only from their denying the charge, but they became angry that it had been brought up to them as a charge from God. This is why, when Stephen told them that they had now become the betrayers and murderers of the Just One, the Lord Jesus, and that they had received the law by the direction of angels, and yet had not kept it, they were cut to the heart with conviction! But it was not a conviction that might lead them to say, as others did in Acts 2: 37 – "What shall we do?" They knew exactly what they were going to do. They began gnashing their teeth at him and advanced to lay violent hands on him. This leads me to say –

In the 3rd place – Stephen persevered in looking to Christ until his faith became sight.

Verse 55 says: "But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look!' "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" This was a most extraordinary gift given to Stephen that day; that he should have this grand sight of the heavens being opened and beholding as he did, the glory of God and the Lord Jesus standing up to support Stephen in the last moments of his life, with an eye to eye sight of His Savior, rallying him on and welcoming him home; this was more than enough for him. It sealed his witness to these blinded wicked men that Jesus was indeed the Son of God; that He had indeed triumphed over sin and death, and that He had indeed risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, to the right hand of the Father. Stephen was enabled to declare this as the joyful confirmation of all that he had believed, for he knew now that he could now endure whatever these men would do to him, knowing that soon he would be with his Lord who was standing plainly in his sight, even when the others could not see Christ at all.

Let this be an encouragement to everyone here who desires to be a good witness to Christ and to persevere in that witness until the end of your life. It is true that we walk by faith and not by sight. It is true that those who preach, preach in the sight of Christ, even when they themselves cannot see him with their physical eyes. It is true that if we set the Lord always before us, that we will not be greatly moved at what men can do to us. But is it not reassuring to know, by the proof of this text, that a most clear sight of Christ as He actually is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, was given to Stephen before he died? If the Lord gave sufficient sight of Christ to Stephen, He will give sufficient ability to you, dear Christian to look to Christ in faith, even if you cannot see Him like Stephen did. This vision of the actual glory of seeing Christ's person when we are dying or about to die, is not given to every Christian, but let it be known to all of us, that Christ's glory can be beheld by a dying Christian, and often is. What happened to Stephen was unique in the history of the Church, but is it not enough to excite, and strengthen, and encourage your faith?

Let us not cling so hard to the things of this life, that we are not prepared at any time to depart and be with Christ. If we are working toward the completion of our mission here upon this earth, to glorify God in the things that we do and say; if we are, by the grace of Christ and His Spirit working towards seeing that a complete witness to Christ will be borne in our life and in the life of our church, then why should we hold back the truth from any person when we are placed in circumstances that the Lord has ordered, so that He might be glorified? Listen to 2nd Corinthians 5: 1 – "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked." "For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life." "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." "So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord." "For we walk by faith, not by sight."

Stephen so persevered in his bold preaching that Christ was pleased to give him a greater sight of Himself. I hope that you are convinced that if Christ did this for Stephen, then He also knows what to do for you when you are placed in such circumstances that you sense that the end of your life, here upon the earth, is drawing nigh. The end here is only the beginning of an eternity of beholding the

glory of God, for all those trusting in Jesus. Therefore, dear brethren, let us live in light of all that is coming for every believer in Christ!

And 4th – Stephen persevered in prayer, both for himself, and for his enemies.

Verse 59 says: “And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” “Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’” “And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” What great grace was given to Stephen in these final moments of his life. The stones are beginning to fall thick and fast on his body. He is feeling them breaking his bones and tearing his flesh, and yet he is concerned with two things. He is concerned that the Lord Jesus would receive his spirit and he is concerned that his enemies would not have this sin that they were committing against him, held against them. He is speaking as though the giving of his life was an offering to God; and so it was. It was his reasonable service of worship to God. Romans chapter 12, verse 1 – “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of worship.” This after all, was what Stephen’s whole sermon was all about. And it was also what his whole witness before these men was all about; how God was to be worshiped. God is not worshiped in temples made with human hands, but he is worshiped in the temple of the true Church, and also in the temple of your body if you are a true Christian. Even in his death, Stephen would preach and pray.

If you are a preacher it is always good to pray while you preach, that your preaching might really reach the hearts of the listeners by the working and power of the Holy Spirit. Stephen’s preaching had really reached his hearers but it was not the result that he might have desired. But it was the result which God had ordained, because He wanted these wicked men to come under conviction of their sins; but they would stifle it with killing the preacher. Stephen was filled with the Spirit, it says in verse 55, and yet not one of these men were softened under the preaching of the word of God to them; they were all to a man, hardened against the truth when they heard it. Let us not grow disillusioned with the preaching of the word of God, or grow skeptical of unbelieving people hearing of the word of God. It is not by the best of preaching that wicked hearts are changed. It is only by the mighty working of the Holy Spirit that a sinner’s heart is opened and changed to receive the word which is preached to them.

This is why, whether we live or die, that we should often be praying for those around us, even those who may be mistreating us. We should remember the words of the Lord Jesus and follow the example of Stephen. The Lord Jesus said in Luke 6: 27 – “But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” This is exactly what Stephen was doing. He wanted to be more like His Master, as he was dying. Jesus said, as He hung on the cross, having been condemned as a bad person, a malefactor, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And in the months that followed, the Father did work in the hearts of some who heard Peter preach the gospel to them. And He did forgive them for Jesus’ sake. Here we do not see a similar result. Their hearts were cut to the quick, even as those who were saved in Acts 2, but the response was not – What must we do to be saved? It was – What must we do to get rid of this man who is trying to pin the murder of Jesus on us?

This is why, when Stephen was dying, he said, “Lord do not charge them with this sin. It was truly his desire to see these wicked opposers saved. And even though Saul, it says in Acts 8: 1, was consenting to his death, and even though made havoc of the church, and persecuted it, yet God had mercy on him a little later, and the wicked persecutor was struck down on the road to Damascus with blinding light, and heard the voice of the Lord Jesus ask him if it was hard to kick against the goads of conviction, that he was wrong to persecute the church of God, for in that he persecuted them, he persecuted Christ. It was the same here. In their persecution and killing of Stephen, these men were persecuting Christ and putting Him to death all over again. Therefore, let us who are still in the land of the living, rejoice in whatever our particular sufferings are for the body of Christ. And let us “fill up in our flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church. Let us learn to pray and to die in a way which will bring glory to Christ.

