

Always the Optimist!

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

⁵⁷ They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸ They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he fell asleep.

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"Is the glass half empty or half full." This is often a test to see if someone is an optimist or a pessimist. The pessimist would see the negative: "We only have a half glass left." The optimist would see the positive: "We will still have a half glass." The truth is, both are right. We have a half glass full of something. It is half empty and it is half full.

The problem with a text like the one before us this morning is it is so easy to dwell only on the negative aspects of it. This text is gory and tragic. We see in this text a classic example of the hatred the world has towards Jesus Christ. I would not be doing my job if I did not warn you of how the majority of the world despises God and his Word. And in this text we have an example of that world taking its hatred out on one of Jesus' followers, Stephen. It is a negative story.

Stephen could have dwelt on the negative and face his persecutors with fear and dread. But something happened that made Stephen an optimist. He saw Jesus at the right hand of God the Father. The glass was half empty as he was being killed. The glass here is also half full because he saw heaven opening up to him. May we be optimists like Stephen. Like him may we have the great confidence we have because of Jesus, a desire to make an the unwavering confession of our faith; and finally, share the same concern he has for sinners.

I. The great confidence we have because of Jesus.

First, let's look at the great confidence we have in Jesus. Friends, we are witnessing a murder here. The Sanhedrin broke several laws. First, Stephen's opponents hired false witnesses. Second, they never sent the case to the jury. In anger they rushed Stephen to kill him. Third, it was Sanhedrin law that if a death penalty was passed, they had to meet again the next day to confirm it, much like our appeals process today. They didn't do that. Finally, it was the Roman governor alone who could pass a death sentence. They never brought it to his attention. They took the law into their own hands.

How did Stephen react? Even though the glass was half empty, he was an optimist. ***"⁵⁵ Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*** We see in this text injustice and hatred and violence. Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father. The sight of Jesus at God's right hand could be interpreted as a bad thing. When the Bible says that it is Jesus who is going to judge the world. You could read this as Stephen being murdered, and now he was about to face the judge who will judge him according to his sins and pronounce the added sentence of damnation like going from the frying pan into the fire.

But Stephen wasn't afraid. And he was glad to see Jesus because he knew he had a place in God's heaven because of Jesus. ***"⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*** Stephen was not afraid to die because he knew that death would lead him to Jesus. Sounds very much like Paul in Philippians: ***"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two."***

Listen to 1 Corinthians 15: ***"For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."*** We deserve to die. Even innocent victims like Stephen deserve to die. His death was only premature. We do because of the wages of sin is death. Death is what we earn. But in Christ all will be made alive. He laid down his life for us. He took it up again in the resurrection. Because he did, he will take our lives into heaven. Stephen didn't pray, "I hope you take me Lord." He prayed, "Receive my spirit." It was certain. Stephen the sinner had a place in heaven because of Jesus.

Boy this puts a perspective on our world. We don't live here. We live in heaven. And what if we experience pain and trouble in this sick world, even die prematurely, painfully? We can be optimists. Look at Jesus at the right hand of the Father. We are going to him in heaven.

II. An unwavering confession of him.

With Jesus at God's right hand, Stephen was not afraid to tell people the truth. At the end of chapter six, we are told, **"Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen . . . These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke."** Stephen was willing to speak the truth. He wasn't being argumentative. He wanted to share the truth to them FOR THEIR SAKE!

The truth is sometimes hard to take. Read the whole chapter and you will notice in the verses right before our text that Stephen called the Sanhedrin still-necked people who were bent on repeating the sin of their fathers by resisting the Holy Spirit and the message of Jesus. This does not sound like something you say to those who have the power to hurt you. But read his whole sermon. He gave a wonderful summary of Old Testament history and used it as a warning—yes, warning, and not as a way to merely win the argument—that they were throwing away in Jesus their salvation! Even when they fumed with anger, he appealed one last time by telling them Jesus is at the right hand of God. Stephen used the law and called a spade a spade because he didn't want them to throw Jesus away. He wanted to share gospel of Jesus so warned them how they were throwing Jesus away. He spoke truthfully because he was trying to save a few more souls.

Like birds, Christians can't be silent. Even if some grouchy, tired man screams out the window to the birds, "BE QUIET," they sing on, not to be mean, but because that is what birds do. So the Christian. This message of Christ means so much to us, we can't hold it in, even in the face of opposition. There is this interesting passage in Job 21: **"Bear with me while I speak, and after I have spoken, mock on."** Sure, it is easy if someone came into the office and asked me to tell them about Jesus. Oh, we dream for moments like that. But what if that person was reluctant? What if they even mocked us? Our natural reaction is to change the subject. But our faith tells us to speak even in the face of mockery.

We don't do this because of some martyr syndrome, or that we are looking for trouble. We don't even do it for ourselves. We do it for our listeners. Many may mock us, but someone, somewhere, will listen and believe.

III. We are concerned for fellow sinners.

"⁵⁷ They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸ They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he fell asleep."

What is the greatest victory you can score against your enemies? That they lose their jobs, homes, money, get put into jail? The greatest victory is they are brought to faith in Jesus and receive his forgiveness. No one in that crowd deserved forgiveness. And looking at the crowd, you would think that they were so far from God that no one would be saved. But God answered Stephen's prayer with at least one individual. A man by the name of Saul was there. He not only gave his approval over what was happening; in the next chapter he went out and hunted down Christians like dogs. But one day Saul would meet Christ on the road to Damascus. This unlikely individual, this persecutor of the Church, would be brought to faith. He would have his sins forgiven. He would eventually change his name to Paul.

This is the exact same attitude Jesus has for us. As it says in Romans 5, while we were God's enemies, he reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son. God didn't wait until we stopped stoning him or breaking his law before he was kind to us. He was kind while we were his enemies. That is Christ's love. That is our love and concern for all fellow sinners. And "fellow" sinners is the way to put it because we are no better than them. We are concerned for them because we know what it means to be a sinner and an enemy of God. We also know what it means to be loved and forgiven by him. So we pray God would forgive even our enemies.

So, is your life half empty or half full? Look at Jesus at the right hand of the Father. It makes an optimist out of you. You will conclude that your glass isn't half full, it is filled to overflowing. We overflow with confidence we will be in heaven, confidence to confess, confidence and concern to share him with fellow sinners. INJ Amen.