Here at Colonial we are on a journey through the book of Acts, and today we find ourselves in the temple, where Stephen—a follower of Jesus Christ—is being tried on the charges of blasphemy. If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to Acts 7 and let’s look to the end of Stephen’s trial and what came next as a result. Please stand and let’s read Acts 7:54-8:1a.

Before we jump into the text, let me remind you of a few details. First, Stephen is a Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Jew who was recently chosen by the Twelve Apostles to serve as a leader and a servant in the Jerusalem church. He is described by Luke as being full of grace and power, and as one who did great signs and wonders among the people of Jerusalem. He was also a capable apologist for the faith who engaged in debate with Greek-speaking synagogue leaders, who Luke records, could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. However, these same synagogue leaders instigated men who filed false charges of blasphemy against Stephen which led to his arrest. Last week we dealt with Stephen’s defense against the charges of blasphemy, which is found in Acts 7:1-53. If you happened to miss last Sunday, I encourage you to review that message on our website to better understand Stephen’s speech. To sum up, Stephen boldly proclaims and accurately recounts the history of God’s faithfulness and the unfortunate history of Israel’s unfaithfulness. He concludes with these words in Acts 7:51-53:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels but did not keep it.”

As we look to what comes next, Luke reports in vs. 54, “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” As we talked about last week, Stephen’s speech essentially tips over the three sacred cows of ancient Judaism—the land, the veneration of Moses and the Mosaic Law, and the centrality of the Temple. And then, if that were not enough, Stephen directly accuses the Sanhedrin...the Supreme Court of Israel...of betraying and murdering the Righteous One...the Messiah...the long-awaited Christ of God. Luke uses the strongest words possible here to denote the seething anger now obvious upon the faces and countenance of the 70-member Sanhedrin. They are literally boiling over with rage. This is not the first time that a follower of Jesus accused them of murder. Very recently Peter accused them...
of murdering Jesus as well, and remember how we noticed that the Sanhedrin was in denial that they had anything to do with killing Jesus. Now, once again, Stephen…who was supposed to be on trial for blasphemy, takes the opportunity of his defense to go on the offense. The trial quickly shifts from Stephen as the accused to Stephen as the accuser. The Sanhedrin shift from those doing the judging to those who are being judged! And who is their judge? Jesus is their judge. Look at what comes next beginning in vs. 55. Luke writes, “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

There’s a lot that just happened here. Most commentators will tell you that this declaration by Stephen is what finally gets him killed. Why? First, Stephen is having an Isaiah 6 vision. If you recall, there are very few stories of people seeing the Glory of God in the Bible. Isaiah’s vision is perhaps the most famous, so let’s turn to Isaiah 6 for just a moment. Here is how Isaiah describes his vision of God’s glory:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

It’s important to have the context of Isaiah’s vision because that is what the Sanhedrin will immediately defer to when they hear Stephen proclaim his vision of God’s glory.

They will remember that in Isaiah’s vision of God’s glory, God sits alone on his throne. There are no others seated or standing at his right side. However, they will also remember the very famous Psalm 110, where we read, “My LORD said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” They will also remember other prophetic passages that speak of the Son of Man who receives power and authority from God. In Daniel 7 we read

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And the Sanhedrin will also remember that Jesus said to this very same group of people shortly before his death, “I tell you that from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:64)

Do you see where this is going? Let me show you.

1) Stephen’s vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God is utterly offensive to the Sanhedrin. Remember, the Jewish leaders had no notion of a “Trinitarian God,” so this concept of anyone sharing in God’s glory is blasphemy to their ears. However, the Sanhedrin remember Psalm 110, so even in the heat of their outrage, they know that only the Messiah…the Son of Man…has ever been pictured as sharing in God’s glory, seated at his right hand.

2) Because Jesus is standing at the right hand of God and sharing in His glory, Jesus now has the power and authority of God, and He will judge the world. If Jesus is judging the world, surely those who murdered Jesus stand condemned. Such a realization would be beyond devastating, so the Sanhedrin members cover their ears. How ironic since Stephen just stated that they were “uncircumcised” in heart and ears. It’s also ironic because in Isaiah’s vision, God tells the prophet, “Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Not only is Jesus fulfilling scripture…so also are these members of the Sanhedrin fulfilling scripture as well.

3) Because Jesus is standing at the right hand of God, and Stephen is a follower of Jesus, Stephen is now validated and vindicated. The notion that Jesus is standing and not seated may likely emphasize that He stands with Stephen, even as He welcomes Stephen into the Kingdom of Heaven.

4) Because Stephen is given this vision of God’s glory, Stephen now qualifies as one of God’s...
prophets, and as we saw last week, “which of the prophets did the Israelites NOT persecute?” As their fathers did before them, the Sanhedrin will kill the messenger rather than heed the message of the prophet and repent.

Now note, there is no formal end to the trial. There is no verdict of “guilty” rendered. And what’s more, we know from all that we read about the trial of Jesus that the Jews did not have permission from Rome to execute capital punishment. That’s why the Sanhedrin put pressure on Pontius Pilate to have Jesus crucified rather than just killing Jesus themselves. However, in this case, the Sanhedrin and those observing the trial of Stephen simply react with a mob mentality. In their unbridled fury, they rush at him, seize him, and according to Luke in vs. 58, “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.” This stoning is not an act of justice; it is an act of injustice.

Let’s pause here and talk about stoning for a moment. I know this is a problem for some of you, because we actually find several verses in the Old Testament that instruct people to be stoned for certain sins against God and others. However, let me remind you that stoning was a common form of capital punishment in the ancient world and among various cultures. As is often the case, the Bible reflects how God redefines the cultural practice of stoning by providing Israel with guidelines that reflect God’s heart for justice. In other words, without the restrictions of God’s law, stoning likely looked a lot like what we’ve seen here in Acts 7. It was a brutal, reactionary breech of justice rather than an intentional act of justice. However, with the restrictions found in God’s law, stoning was very specifically regulated, hopefully toward a just and redemptive end. Like most punishments, stoning most powerfully served as a deterrent against practices that defamed God and poisoned His people. That doesn’t mean that God was in favor of stoning…I suspect He wasn’t, because the practice of stoning did not carry over as a prominent method of capital punishment for the Christian community. Nevertheless, stoning was going to happen in the ancient world, so God’s law provided boundaries and prescriptions for how and when it might be done in a way that would set Israel apart as God’s chosen people.

There are several examples of this tendency to amend and restrict cultural practices within the Old Testament. Polygamy was very common in the ancient world, and often for socio-economic reasons. Jesus and Paul help us to understand that God’s intention for marriage was always between one man and one woman, yet God gives rules and boundaries for the ancient practice of polygamy because, within the context of the ancient world, it was going to happen. How it happened, and with whom it happened, needed to be amended to bring increasing glory to God.

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by setting the Israelites apart from other countries and religious traditions.

In the case of stoning, as terrible as stoning was, God restricted the punishment of stoning in the Old Testament to a specific list of sins, and even then, stoning could only be employed upon the testimony of two witnesses. And those witnesses had to be the first to throw the stones…which would mean that if the witnesses were lying or bearing false witness, the blood of the stoning victims would be on them personally.

Luke does not describe the stoning of Stephen with any kind of specific detail, but he does acknowledge that the witnesses…who we know were “false witnesses,” entrusted their cloaks to Saul before throwing the first stones at Stephen. Luke goes on to say in 8:1a that Saul approved of his execution. By extension, then, Saul was complicit, and even a possible conspirator in the death of Stephen. We’ll come back to that nugget next week.

Luke concludes his description of the stoning event with these words, “And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.”

Now, if you’re sitting there thinking…”Wow, Stephen’s final words prior to his execution sure sound a lot like the words that Jesus spoke from the cross!”…you’re right! However, notice that instead of crying out “Father…” like Jesus did, Stephen prays directly to Jesus, who he also refers to as Lord. That is huge. Jesus modeled the way for His followers, but now Jesus has all the authority on earth and in heaven, He occupies his place at the right hand of God the Father, and the followers of Jesus are free to direct their prayers “in his Name” as well as prayers to “our Father in Heaven.”

Again…there is a lot here, but let’s step back and look at the bigger picture for a moment. What we see in Stephen is the quintessential picture of a Jesus follower who lives like Jesus, talks like Jesus, ministers like Jesus, prays like Jesus, and even dies like Jesus. This is what we’ve been observing for the past three weeks as we’ve unpacked the life, ministry, testimony, and now execution of Stephen. His life looks a whole lot like the life of Jesus. That is as it should be. What is the goal of Christian discipleship if it is not to have our lives look more and more like the life of Christ?
Let me remind you of the great commission that Christ gave to His disciples...the apostles...shortly before his ascension in Matthew 28 when He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, into all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Can you see how Stephen’s story provides an example of what it looks like when disciples of Jesus make disciples of Jesus?

Can we not assume that it was through the public proclamation of the gospel that Stephen became convicted of his sin and that led to repentance? His repentance was then accompanied by his calling upon the name of Jesus as Lord and submitting to baptism in His name. As a new believer Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and drawn to the Word of God. He became an apprentice to the Apostles and learned everything he could about Jesus the Messiah, and he put the teachings of Jesus into practice. He used his spiritual gifts for ministry in the local church and the city of Jerusalem, and that led Stephen to be placed into leadership among the believers. His faith grew and so did his boldness. No doubt Stephen committed his life to reaching more and more people through his defense of the faith, his acts of love and mercy, and his participation in the ministries of the local church.

Can you see that Stephen represents what happens when the church gets it right...when we do our job well? When the church is faithful, we cooperate with God’s Holy Spirit to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Stephen was a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, and as I’ve shared with you before, the Greek word for “witness” is “martyras;” which is where we get the English word, “martyr.”

We often say that Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and by that we mean that Stephen was the first Christian to be slain because of his faith in Jesus. But let us honor the true meaning of the word “martyras.” Stephen was an authentic WITNESS...he provided a testimony to the power and love of Jesus through his living, his service, his teaching, his defense of the Gospel, his prayers, his forgiveness, and his death.

Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “You will be my martyrs...in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Martyrdom is our calling...to be His witnesses, like Stephen, whatever the cost.

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I know that’s heavy, but listen: that’s biblical Christianity. The Bible is completely unfamiliar with low commitment, low cost, low conviction socialized Christianity that is so common place in our country and in our churches today. When the ancient world heard the word “Christian,” they thought of Stephen, and that’s how the Gospel spread to every corner of the world.

Now I understand that we are all very different, and that some of us are terribly broken and hurting…and I understand that some of you might walk away from this message thinking that I expect everyone to look and behave like Stephen. No…that’s not what I’m saying.

Here’s what I’m saying: the hurting and the broken, the lost and the confused, the critics and the seekers…the whole world for that matter…will sit up and take notice…they will inevitably be drawn to examine who Jesus is…when they come across a group of believers who show them what Jesus looks like. What does that mean? It means our lives should portray how Jesus would live our lives if He took on our skin, our relationships, our pains, our opportunities, and so on. It means a gradual shift from exalting “me” to exalting Christ in every corner of our existence. It means applying and practicing the imperatives of our Lord in every situation, even when no one is watching.

Let me ask you a question: if you died today on the way home from this service, what would people say about your life? Would anyone say, “I caught a glimpse of what Jesus looks like” by watching the way you live, the way you serve, the way you talk, the way you listen, the way you pray, the way you forgive, the way you love the children, the way you endure suffering, the way you love your enemies, or even by the way you died? Has it ever occurred to you that when it’s all said and done, the whole point of our existence for this short time in life is to make Jesus known in the way we live out our lives in the time we’ve been given?

Aahh…you say, but why would I follow in the footsteps of Stephen? His faith got him stoned. True…but next week I will show you how the death of this Christian martyr ignited the spread of the gospel into every corner of the globe. Listen: in a very short time, we’re all going to die. We’re all short-timers here. What will your life be remembered for? What will your death inspire people to become? Will people see Jesus in your life, or even in your death? Will you cooperate with the Holy Spirit to become a Christian martyr…a witness…whatever the cost? Just imagine the impact if even a few of us here today said, “Yes, Lord…I’m in…whatever the cost.”

Let’s pray.

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