Our Greatest Reward is God Himself: our hope in the midst of suffering

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| 09.06-07.14 | MHC | Acts 7:54-8:3 | Those who suffer for God get more of God | 35 min |

**Prayer and Introduction:**

Attn: At least 100 miles below the earth’s surface, heated to about 2,200 oF, and squeezed under 725,000 lbs of pressure – a diamond is made. Under pressure, will your break, buckle or blow up or will you be steadfast in your faith, trusting God’s purposes?

Them: Our God is the God of outcomes. (title:) **Our Greatest Reward is God Himself**

**Today we will see the end of Stephen’s life (struct) and find strategies for faithfulness when faithfulness to God doesn’t make sense (Relv)**.

**Let’s turn to Acts 7:54 on Page 916.** Keep that Bible if you need one. (**Read vv. 54-60**)

* **Stoned Series:** looking at the last few min. of Stephen’s life. In 6, captured and falsely accused. Most of chap. 7, his sermon and accusation of the leaders.
* **Vs.** **53:** Stephen accuses them of being so stiff-necked as they tried to keep the law, that they themselves broke the law. **He gave a case of suffering for God’s sake** which was providential for what he was going through and the Church was facing.

**vv. 54, 57: Rage of the Jewish leaders against Stephen**

* Vs. 54 - **Enraged** literally, ‘Hearing these things, their hearts were sawn in half.’
* **Grinding their teeth** is used 7 times in NT and some in OT, “Gnashing”. So mad!
* Set the scene: **Extreme anger**, wanting blood spilled and justice done (V. 57). They screamed to drown out what he was saying, “Stopped” their ears and ran at him.

**The darkness opposes the light, but does not overcome it (vv 54, 57)**

* It was said of JC in **John 1:5, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”** No matter what, God always wins. *Repeat after me*
* **Those who opposed JC wanted to take out anyone and anything associated with Him** (and the same is true of our enemy today). This is what S. was facing.
* **Our enemy strategizes everyday about how he is going to take us out**. Your ear should be burning b/c hell burns hot with conversation against you. Be on guard.
* This shouldn’t cause you to be fearful if fear God. “Be still. God fights for you.”
* **As the Jewish leaders raged, Stephen stayed calm**. Held by the Spirit of God, he was still and kept his gaze upward. “Full of the Holy Spirit” in v. 54, 6:5 and 6:8

**READ AGAIN 55-56: Stephen is given a glimpse of the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ**

* **By voicing this vision of God and JC, Stephen placed the final nail in his own coffin**, offending his audience. They believed no one shared God’s place in heaven
* The fact saw *the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the throne of God* was a **very rare gift**! This was **his reward for incredible faithfulness under trial**!
* **There are only a few instances in Scripture where someone actually gets a vision of the heavenly throne room** (Isa 6; Eze 10; 2 Cor 12; Rev 4-5)

**God rewards those who suffer for His name by exposing more of Himself to His people.** (told to Lauren and Michael)

David Jones, mentor & friend remembers a man saying, “Just as God gives grace so you can live eternally, he will also give grace so you can die for him, if necessary.” This was true for Stephen and can be true for us should we face death for the sake of our faith.

* I don’t want you to suffer, but when you do, I want you to suffer well.
* **Our first response is to press in, not run away**. Stephen was rewarded here.

Notice: **This should comfort us all – he saw Jesus at God’s right hand:**

* Now, Stephen about to also be convicted of blasphemy says a similar statement, **“I see … the son of man standing at God’s right hand” (7:56).**
* **Compare to Jesus trial to Stephen’s**: As JC was being convicted of blasphemy, he simply said, **“You will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the throne of the Almighty, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62)**.
  + JC promised, “The world will hate you but they hated me first” (John 15:18).
* **Several scholarly debates about why JC was *standing***. We cannot know for sure, but I do count it as significant that he is mentioned as standing. I like the imagery of Christ standing to meet the first martyr after his death. I like the idea that he standing to acknowledge Stephen as God’s own, (cf. Luke 12:8 & Matt 10:33) Stand for mom
* **The fact that He is at the Right hand of God,** we can be certain that God accepted his as our payment for sin and we can be sure that he is our eternal hope.

**This is hope for us, no matter what we face we will have more of God by**:

* **Gaining Genuine Faith**: We suffer now so that our faith, of greater worth than gold, may be proved genuine and result in praise, glory and honor (1 Peter 1:3-9)
* **Gaining Joy in Christ**: Ultimately, if we partake in Christ's suffering, our suffering will bring exceeding joy (1 Pet 4:12-15) – “If you partake in the sufferings of JC”
* **Greater dependence upon God**: Suffering occurs so that we might trust in God and not ourselves. (2 Co 1:8-11 and 1 Peter 4:19).

(Trans) **Paul – “To live is Christ but to die is gain.”** – to live is to be with him in suff

**But to die is gain [more of God]: Debbie Smith:**

* Last week announced **Debbie Smith**, wife of Wayne exec. Pastor, in our services
* She **passed away on Sunday** | I was there, Wayne’s Testimony – I gave her to God
* Mem. Service Wednesday and Sat in Dallas. Pastor Mike, Jane, Jon and W. Anderson
* She was a **holy woman**, **left us unexpectedly**, not a surprise to God. **Her reward** for a faithful life (seen in her kids, husband, extended fam, friends) – **More of God**.
  + Brian’s words: **As we stumbled through our services here on Sunday, she saw God for all He is** and with all of his glory – and Christ at his right hand.

**vv. 58-60: The stoning of Stephen: A MODEL FOR RESPONDING LIKE CHRIST IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING**

* **v. 58**: Two key things to notice here: (1) **They observed they Levitical Law but disappointed God (description of the killing – A-1).** It is possible to do all the ‘Right things’ according to the law but still break the heart of God. Gal. is all about being set free from the law and having a right relationship with God through JC.
* (2) **S. had just explained that we do not need the temple to access God, now outside the city (yet alone the temple) he is talking to God.** This made them mad but is our hope and truth. “Be anxious about nothing… but in prayer.” Phil 4:6
* **v. 59: Look at the parallels to Christ’s Death**: Stephen commits his spirit to God. Recalls the cry of JC on cross, ‘*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*!’ (Luke 23:46)
* **v. 60: Stephen asks for the sin of his killers to not be held against them**. This Like Jesus on the cross, ‘*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’* (Luke 23:34).

The righteous response for Suffering is to:

* **Trust God’s greater purposes**: keep the end in mind – God is all about God’s glory. We should **be patient for the Lord's return** (like a farmer waits for rain), and we should strengthen and stabilize our hearts for the Lord's return (James 5:7-11).
* **Stay faithful even if it means death**: death may come in more forms other than the ending of physical life: death of relationship, dream, ambition. We should be faithful during our suffering (even to death), and **He will give us life** (Revelation 2:10)

**So what happened next— let’s READ 8:1-3:**

* v. 2: **Devout men buried Stephen**. NIV, ‘Godly.’ This would have involved some risk, for they would’ve been associating themselves with a man just mobbed/stoned
* **Made great lamentation over him**: HCSB, NIV, ‘mourned deeply.’ This shows how much they loved Stephen, and how much they would miss him.

**(8:1-3) Rises of persecution of Christians under Saul’s leadership.**

* **vv 1 & 3: Paul is officially on the scene**– called “Saul.” A Jew of all Jews, doing the work he thought was right – eradicating the misguided or heretics from the earth.
  + Jesus Said, **‘Indeed the hour *is* coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God’ (John 16:2).**
* The non-messianic Jews were so violent that **virtually every Christian in Jerusalem had to get out of town as fast as possible**. They were running for their lives. We should not judge them for this. Jesus had told the disciples, ‘*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next’* (Matt 10:23). There is nothing wrong with escaping persecution, so long as it does not involve denying Jesus’ name.

**Even persecution can be used for God’s purposes—namely make an impression on Saul and disperse the church**

Conclusion: **God’s purposes are never spoiled**

* **As they scattered, this would have been the beginning of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8**, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria…”
* **It is fascinating to think that all or most of this account was probably given to Luke by the Apostle Paul himself.** Paul recounted all this for Luke after his conversion, surely having it all sink in as he retold every story. **Stephen’s death surely had a profound influence on Paul, who later alluded to that experience** (as we can see by his own admonition in Acts 22:20).

**The very one that approved of Stephen’s Death** said this,

**“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.**

**one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

(Philippians 3:7-14 ESV)