**Study Notes on Acts 7:54-8:3**

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NOTE: These notes are not intended to read as an article or well-rounded written work. Rather, this is a collage of different research and resources that will assist in the preparation of a sermon.

These notes are a compilation of both Josh Weidmann and David Jones personal study notes.

**Working Sermon Title**: Our Greatest Reward is God Himself: our hope in the midst of suffering

**Summary of the Passage**: Stephen has just finished his sermon and accuses the Jewish leaders of breaking the law themselves. Filled with rage they kill him for speaking again their convictions of the Law and the Temple and ask he dies he sees a vision of God’s glory. This begins the martyrdom of the church under Saul’s leadership.

**Outline of the passage:**

1. (vv. 54, 57) Rage of the Jewish leaders against Stephen

2. (vv. 55-56) Stephen is given a glimpse of the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ

3. (vv. 58-60) The stoning of Stephen

* 58 – The witnesses lay their garments down and begin stoning him
* 59 – Stephen commits his spirit to the Lord
* 60 – Stephen asks for the sin of his killers to not be held against them

4. (8:1-3) Rises of persecution of Christians under Saul’s leadership.

**The Main Point of the Passage:**

**Exegetical Idea**: The Holy Spirit was leading Stephen, even in his death and the rise of persecution was causing the church to disperse.

**Theological Idea**: God is sovereign over his people and his plan, even if it results in death; He is spreading His glory and having Christ at His right hand.

**Applicational Idea**: God’s people often suffer for doing God’s work.

**Possible Preaching Outline**:

1. The darkness opposes the light, but does not overcome it (vv 54, 57)
2. Main Preaching Point: God rewards those who suffer for His name by exposing more of Himself to His people. (55-56)
3. In the face of suffering we must respond as Christ (58-60)
4. Even persecution can be used for God’s purposes—namely make an impression on Saul and disperse the church (8:1-3)

**CONTEXT BEFORE AND AFTER THIS PASSAGE:**

An overarching theme of chapter 7 is that**God’s people often suffer for doing God’s work**. We read about Abraham’s offspring, who ‘*would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years’* (v. 6). We read about Joseph’s ‘afflictions’ in Egypt (v. 10). There is ‘famine’ and ‘great affliction’ (v. 11); the exposure of infants (v. 19); wrongs and oppression under the Egyptians (v. 24); flight and exile (v. 29); living in the wilderness (v. 30); ‘affliction’ and ‘groaning’ (v. 34); rejection (v. 35); rebellion (v. 39); idolatry (vv. 40-41); resistance (v. 51); and persecution, betrayal and murder (v. 52).

**Stephen is articulating a narrative theology of suffering** in his sermon in chapter 7. To do God’s will is to suffer. This may, in part, explain why Luke records so much of Stephen’s defense. It would have been a great comfort for Jewish believers who were scattered by persecution, and cut off from temple and synagogue worship. The split between messianic and non-messianic Jews was widening.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Exegesis and Commentary:**

**[54] Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.**

In the previous verse (53), Stephen accuses them of being so stiff-necked as they tried to keep the law, that they themselves broke the law. They are accusing him of breaking the law, but in doing so they are actually breaking it themselves.

*Now when they heard these things they were enraged*. NASB, ‘they were cut to the quick.’ KJV, ‘they were cut to the heart.’ The phrase is literally, ‘Hearing these things, their hearts were sawn in half.’ The verb for ‘enraged’ literally means to divide with a saw; hence cut to the quick, or infuriate. It is used only here and Acts 5:33, where Peter and John faced opposition from the Jewish leaders: ‘*When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them*.’

The idea of them *grinding their teeth* at him is the same idea seen 7 other times in the NT as “Gnashing” teeth. It is a sign in both the Old and New Testaments of extreme anger.

As Stephen’s sermon started the people were probably anxious to hear where he was going. However, as he continued, they soon understood that he was turning the tables on them and charging them with blasphemy. With each word, they became increasingly angry.

**[55] But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God**. **[56] And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”**

Here we have the running theme of Acts captured yet again. Other occurrences include: Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 5:3; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9, 52; 17:16. This is Luke’s way of showing that **everything Stephen said was prompted by the Holy Spirit.**

The fact that he was about to see *the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the throne of God* was a very rare gift! While God’s glory was manifested in rare instances on earth, **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). This was no doubt his reward for incredible faithfulness under trial.

David Jones, my mentor and friend said that he 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.

As the Jewish leaders allowed their rage to get ahold of them, Stephen stayed calm. Held by the Spirit of God, he was still and kept his gaze upward. Soon he was rewarded with a vision of the glory of God.

Stephen exclaimed, *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.* By voicing this vision, Stephen placed the final nail in his own coffin, thoroughly offending his audience and convincing them that the charge of blasphemy was true. They believed no one could share God’s place in heaven.

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It is interesting to think of the comparison to Jesus trial at nearly the same place, with the same type of people, also close to his death. As Jesus was being convicted of blasphemy, he simply made the statement, “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).

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). In both cases, Jesus and Stephen were convicted for blasphemy. If they had convicted Jesus and not Stephen, they would have been negating their previous decision to crucify Christ. They were left with no choice but to also convict Stephen to the point of death.

Jesus promised, “The world will hate you because they have hated me first” (John 15:18).

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**This is the only place in the NT where Jesus is said to be ‘standing’ next to God**; in all of the other references he is seated. See Heb 1:3, ‘*After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’* (cp. Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; 16:19; Luke 20:42; 22:69; Acts 2:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). This probably indicates his rising both to defend and to receive his child. The seat at right hand of the king or the master of the house was the place of honor and authority. Jews coveted those special chairs (see Matt 20:21; Mark 12:38-39; Luke 14:8-11).

There are several different scholarly debates about the position of Christ *standing* in this passage. We cannot know for sure what is meant here, 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 also like the idea that he standing to acknowledge Stephen as God’s own, in accordance with Luke 12:8 and Matt 10:33.

**We must remember that the greatest reward for any of our suffering is God himself.** When God gives us more of his presence on earth, or even takes us to be with Him in his presence in heaven, it is the greatest gift we can receive.

###

This is the only instance of *the Son of Man* outside of the Gospels. It is only Jesus who says this term, before this occurrence. It has OT roots in Daniel 7:13-14. **The idea here is “the one who will be given world dominion”.**

**[57] But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.**

*They cried out with a loud voice*to drown out Stephen’s words. It is also singular to emphasize that they were all screaming together at the same time.

The *stopped ears* was a response to what they believed to be heresy. The term literally means ‘to press upon enough to close.’ They didn’t want to hear anything he was saying.

*Rushing together at him* is inNASB, ‘with one impulse.’ NKJ, ‘with one accord.’ The word for together literally means ‘of one mind.’ Picture a rushing angry mob about to take him to his death.

**[58] Then 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.**

*Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him*. NASB, ‘had driven him out.’ HCSB, ‘threw him out.’ NIV, ‘dragged him out.’ According to Levitical law, a blasphemer was to be stoned outside of the camp: ‘*Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death*’ (Lev 24:14-16).

This is the poignant part of the story. Stephen has just chronicled the rejection of the Lord by his people, stressing how the people of God are not tied to one specific geographic location. The fact that believers are wanderers on the face of the earth, not limited to the Temple as an access point to the Lord, is powerfully illustrated by Stephen’s death outside the gates of the city. He is thrown out as a blasphemer (which he is not), and executed away from his people.

* **Quote**: F.F. Bruce describes from the Mishnah how deaths by stoning were conducted in Jewish society: “When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned…When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, ‘Confess; for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and every one who confessed has a share in the age to come.’…Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped…The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.”[[2]](#endnote-1)

**It is important to note also that Stephen’s stoning was not an organized trial, but rather a mob murder**. There is no impartiality of judges, no presence of the Roman authority. The picture we get from this passage is that of an uncontrollable, riotous crowd that surges upon Stephen in a rage and kills him swiftly. In any government, death sentences are generally not permitted by anyone except the highest authority.

*And the witnesses laid down their garments*. These witnesses are the same men who testified against Stephen in 6:13. **Jewish law required the witnesses to be the first to act as executioners**: ‘*The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst’* (Deut 17:7). Mishnah law required that the person executed would be stripped of their clothing. But here it was the executioners who took off their robes to move more freely. The witnesses would have had to be the first to stone him, then the people.

*at the feet of a young man named Saul*. In the middle the commotion, the witnesses entrust their robes (a man would have two, if wealthy) at the feet of a powerful ally. Saul, of course, would later become the Apostle Paul. **Here he is described as a ‘young man,’ which in Jewish culture denoted a person who was between the ages of 24 and 40.** After forty, you were considered an ‘old man’ or ‘elder’ (which was a desirable thing in that culture).

**[59] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”**

*And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*. This recalls the cry of Jesus on the cross, ‘*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*!’ (Luke 23:46). Note another parallel to Jesus’ crucifixion in the next verse.

**[60] 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.**

*And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice*. NKJ, HCSB, ‘he knelt down.’

*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*. This recalls the prayer of Jesus on the cross, ‘*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’* (Luke 23:34).

*And when he had said this, he fell asleep*. A common Christian euphemism for death (cf. John 11:11; Acts 13:36; 1 Thes 4:13-15; 2 Pet 3:4). This is a peaceful description of his passing.

**[8:1] And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.**

*And Saul approved of his execution*. NASB, ‘in hearty agreement.’ NKJ, ‘consenting.’ HCSB, ‘agreed.’ NIV, ‘giving approval.’ Jesus had predicted: ‘*Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God’* (John 16:2).

It is fascinating to think that all or most of this account was probably given to Luke by the Apostle Paul himself. Most likely Luke would not have been there to see any of this, but Paul would have been. He 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 (Acts 22:20).**

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem*. The **opposition to Christianity up to this point has been exclusively against the leaders** of the church—the apostles and deacons. **Now it broadens to include anyone who claims allegiance to Jesus Christ**.

*and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria*. 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.

This would have been the beginning of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria…”

*except the apostles*. Strangely, the most visible leaders of the church were able to remain in Jerusalem untouched, presumably in hiding. They would have seen it as their duty to stay at their post as Christ established his church from there.

**[2] Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.**

*Devout men buried Stephen*. NIV, ‘Godly.’ This would have involved some risk, for **they would have been associating themselves with a man who had just been executed by an angry mob**.

*and made great lamentation over him*. HCSB, NIV, ‘mourned deeply.’ **This shows how much they loved Stephen, and how much they would miss him**.

**[3] But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.**

*But Saul was ravaging the church*. NKJ, ‘made havoc.’ NIV, ‘began to destroy.’ In Philippians, Paul describes the depth of his zeal for the Law of Moses: ‘*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church’* (Phil 3:6). Elsewhere he confessed, ‘*I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it’* (Gal 1:13**). The fact that Paul had persecuted Christians haunted him the rest of his days**. We can see this in places like 1 Cor 15:9, ‘*For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*,’ and 1 Tim 1:13, 15, ‘*formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. . . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost*.’

Saul did not see the early Hellenistic Jews as merely misguided but rather as imposters to the Jewish faith. They were taking the law and the traditions of their faith and twisting them to a Messiah and belief system other than the core convictions of Judaism.

*and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison*. Luke mentioned earlier how the early Christians ate in one another’s homes (2:46, literally, ‘from house to house’), and how the apostles taught about Jesus ‘from house to house’ (Acts 5:42). Later, Paul will mention how he taught the Ephesians ‘from house to house’ (Acts 20:20). But here the young Pharisee named Saul is said to go ‘from house to house,’ arresting Christians—quite a turn of events.

1. From David Jones Personal Commentary [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts.* 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)