

19—Acts 7.54-8.1a—The Triune God is With Us

I. Introduction

- a. "In his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon tells the story of a group of POWs working on the Burma Railway during World War II."
 - i. "At the end of each day the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. 'All die! All die!' he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward and the guard clubbed him to death with his rifle while he stood silently to attention. When they returned to the camp, the tools were counted again and no shovel was missing."
- b. This is a picture of what it looks like to gaze heavenward. What an honorable death. It's what it looks like when you know eternal life with God awaits you. It is like this: with the joy set before him he endured the cross.
- c. We must look beyond this world to live and die like this.

II. Main Point

- a. The Kingdom of God advances by serving and speaking for Christ. It will result in suffering and that suffering may lead to death but the triune God is with him to the end.

III. Outline

- a. The responses of a World made up of Sinners (even "religious" ones)
- b. The responses of a disciple of Jesus
- c. Our Response: We must love our enemies and endure suffering

IV. Exposition

- a. In this scene, we see the nature of mankind on display. We all agree that this world is made up of sinners. There's only been one exception to that and his name was Jesus. We need to see their response to the message from Stephen. The Kingdom advances through speaking the gospel. How they respond is part of that process.
 - i. It's not an enjoyable thing to watch how sin dominates humanity. Being enraged is not uncommon among people. Everyone has been there to some degree. All of us move to a boiling point at different rates of speed. We all have our pet triggers, too. But this is in all of us!
 - ii. In this particular scene, those who listened to Stephen's defense have been filled with rage.
 1. Stephen had been charged with speaking against the holy place and the law.
 - a. He proved that, yes, he was part of "our fathers" who received the promises of God but displayed a pattern of disobeying God and delaying the fulfillment of those promises.
 - i. He made this clear in his message through the jealousy of Joseph. The rejection of Moses. The refusal of the law. And murder of Jesus. And now they are rejecting the message of Stephen.
 - ii. God continued his pattern of rescuing his people even when they rejected him. God had sent his only Son. He came to his own, just as Moses had promised, and his own did not receive him.
 2. Stephen's conclusion, which is right, brought on this rage. He said, and I quote, (Acts 7:51-53) ⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² 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, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

- a. This is the part that got him in trouble. It was fine so long as Stephen did not name them as continuing the patterns of their fathers. And specifically, they had betrayed and murdered the Righteous One that had been promised by the prophets.
 - b. And, as we noted, Stephen himself has broken from the pattern of his fathers by repenting and trusting in Jesus Christ—the Redeemer.
 - i. In this indictment, he switches to “your fathers” and makes clear they are still following the same patterns of sin as their fathers did.
 - ii. Their response could have been like we have already heard in (Acts 2:37) ³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"
3. There will be different responses to the gospel.
- a. Those in Acts 2 who were cut to the heart repented and were baptized.
 - b. These here in Acts 7 are cut to the heart and grind their teeth with rage.
 - c. We are witnesses for Christ. We cannot determine the response.
 - i. We need to be ready to respond because our response matters. As we will see, Stephen’s response further displayed the glory of Christ by his actions. They heard the message and the saw Christ in him. What they do with it is their responsibility.
 - ii. Many people will not like the gospel message. From mere indifference to rage, if you are a faithful witness, you will see it all.
 - iii. Do you fear the response of people to the good news of Christ?
 - 1. Do not lose heart, dear Christian. God is with you.
 - 2. Take courage in what you see in Stephen’s response.
- b. Now, while the crowd is growling, Stephen is gazing into heaven. We will return to those who are enraged in a moment but how would you respond to a crowd of people baring their teeth like wolves?
- i. Stephen does not have the resources within himself to respond the way he does. Notice what we may not often see when the world is enraged at us but is indeed true.
 - 1. The triune God is with Stephen. V. 55 he is full of the Holy Spirit. God’s presence is IN Stephen. Like the holy temple where God’s presence dwelled, now you see the Holy Spirit dwelling in Stephen. But how does that help?
 - a. First, is the Holy Spirit afraid of this crowd? No.
 - b. Is this crowd more powerful than the Spirit? No.
 - c. Where does Stephen focus his attention? He gazed into heaven not on things below.
 - i. What will become of these things below? That’s right, they will all pass away.
 - ii. What will become of the things above? True. They will never pass away.
 - iii. You will either look horizontally for help which is always temporary or you will look vertically—upward—for help which is eternal.
 - 1. (Ps. 123:1) To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
 - 2. While gazing into heaven, he sees the glory of God. In other words, he sees the infinite perfections on display...where? How?
 - a. He sees them in Jesus who is God in the flesh now resurrected and standing at the right hand of God!
 - i. At Jesus’ trial, they called for his crucifixion because he said this: (Matt. 26:63-64) the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God,

tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power

1. They called this blasphemy. Why? They rightly understood his claim to mean he was equal with God!
 - a. I can imagine this seems odd to some of you but one way equality is expressed by Jesus being seated by him not below him. Nothing else in all of creation can rise to that level of side by side.
 - ii. He has been seated but now he is standing!
 1. At such a moment, the Lord stands to take full notice. At the very least this says he is paying close attention. Let's wait to say more later.
 - b. Let's not forget about the growling crowd. I say that because it seems Stephen has.
 - i. There's a line in a song that says: "I am unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory." Or the line we just sang, "just one glimpse of Him in glory will the toils of life repay."
 1. These images are amazing. It fits this scene. It's as though the glory of God has passed between the growling crowd and Stephen.
 2. He sees heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!
3. This is no offhanded statement. This is a clear connection with the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and what Stephen sees before him.
 - a. Here's what I think he is alluding to: (Dan. 7:13-14) ¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.
 - b. All the promises mentioned in Stephen's message last week find their fulfillment in this. No one gets the land but Jesus.
 - i. Indeed, he is the promised heir of Abraham. And through him does one have access to the inheritance.
 - ii. How? Repent and be baptized in the name Jesus. In him you will be forgiven and counted righteous by faith. This is what Paul unpacks in (Gal. 4:7) ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.
 4. Why is this important right here in this passage?
 - a. Because Stephen is about to die. You could be asking Stephen if it was worth saying what he did? "Stephen, tell us, what is it like to be heir of God?"
 - i. Is it worth giving up a tent to live in a beautiful house?
 - ii. Is it worth giving up temporary for eternal?
 - iii. Is it worth sharing the gospel in hope that someone in the crowd will repent and believe?
 - b. Christians have a category that says dying is gain not loss!

- c. Christians have this understanding that when a seed falls into the ground and dies it bears much fruit.
 - d. Only the promise of eternal life with Jesus can cause a man to appear so reckless.
 - e. Does Stephen's life testify about the truth of Jesus and the resurrection?
 - i. He didn't risk his life for a dead Jesus. He is alive! And because of that he knows he will live forever too!
- c. One thing that's hard to show in writing is overlap. When things happen at the same time you have to write them separately. The enraged crowd responds again to Stephen's claim of seeing the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The Kingdom advances through suffering as well.
 - i. You should probably imagine that while Stephen points upward when he says "behold" and then describes what he sees, the crowd breaks in trying to drown out what he is saying.
 - 1. Notice there in (Acts 7:57) ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.
 - 2. They clearly know what he means very quickly. So quick they start yelling over his words and closing their ears.
 - 3. What is Stephen saying that offends them even more? They respond just like the crowd did when Jesus said the same thing.
 - a. If he hadn't already, they are certain that he committed blasphemy.
 - i. To equate God with man is blasphemy. And they are right if Jesus is merely a man. The Gospels prove otherwise. But evidence doesn't matter to false witnesses.
 - 4. Stephen had said they were uncircumcised in heart and ears. They cover their ears attempting not to hear what they believe to be blasphemous words of Stephen.
 - ii. Claiming that he sees the Son of Man standing causes them to do more than just throwing a tantrum.
 - 1. The end of v. 57 says they rushed together at him. (Acts 7:58) Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.
 - a. This is mob violence. They more than likely broke Roman law that had jurisdiction over them.
 - b. No indictment from the high priest and council. The witnesses that Luke stated were false carry out their own death sentence. We know it was the witnesses because in (Acts 7:58) And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.
 - c. Let's not forget this. Stephen is being dragged out of the city and stoned based on false witnesses. This was against the very law they say they are protecting.
 - iii. Unknown to them, their actions will result in the advancement of the Kingdom. We will see that next week.
- d. Now let's take a look at Stephen's response to those stoning him. This has been building for some time. The arrest of Peter and John then an arrest and beating of all the apostles, now death.
 - i. Jesus had said in (Lk. 13:34) ³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
 - ii. Stephen was sent with the message of redemption. Notice in (Acts 7:59-60) ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."
 - 1. How can a man like us respond like this?
 - a. The only answer I have is the Lord! Just like Peter was willing but weak BEFORE the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. When he received of the Holy Spirit,

he had the strength to stand and speak in the midst of a hostile world of religious sinners.

- b. God will receive the glory. All who suffer like this know that God did it through them.
 - i. This is what happens: (1 Pet. 4:14) ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.
2. Real people who followed Christ to the end are found full of the Spirit and full of grace.
 - a. They respond not in their own power but in the Spirit of Christ.
 - i. They even say and do some of the things Jesus did at his death.
 1. Receive my spirit
 2. Praying here that Jesus would not hold this sin against them.
- iii. Why do followers of Christ die?
 1. The manner in which Stephen dies may cause you some problems.
 2. The full triune God is there. Why is this not stopped?
 - a. The immediate purpose comes in next week's text. Because of this the Church is scattered and as they leave Jerusalem, they scatter the gospel and many are saved!
 - b. Later, the Lord seems to answer Stephen's prayer for at least one of those present, namely Saul.
 - c. Jesus did not promise that those who followed him would be free from suffering in this life but they would be free from suffering forever later.
 - i. He did promise they would suffer. He did promise that our suffering would have purpose. He did promise to be with his followers.
 - ii. Those throwing the stones think God is with them in the temple but he's not there. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus changed that forever. The Spirit of God is IN Stephen and with Stephen.
 1. He was with him while in the city and God was still with him when they drug him out of the city.
 2. And now his soul is about to be with God forever!
 3. I'm not sure a more peaceful image of death that could be used than the one here. (Acts 7:60) And when he had said this, he fell asleep.
 - a. Peace in the midst of violence.
 - b. Saul gave his approval to this. Something he never forgot as we will see later in chapter 22.
 - c. The Kingdom advanced by proclaiming the message in the strength that God provided but Christ was made visible in the suffering of Stephen. The triune God was with him to the end. And now Stephen is with God forever!
 - d. His message and his death still speak!

V. Response

- a. What is our response?
 - i. First and foremost, we must be satisfied in God! Our love for anyone else needs to flow out of a deep love for our Redeemer! Trust him. Lean on him. Enjoy him. Walk with him.
 - ii. Next, it must be this: (Acts 1:8) ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
 - iii. And It must also be this: (Lk. 6:27-28) ²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

- b. For the anyone among us that you were told that suffering wasn't part of following Christ, they didn't tell you the whole truth.
 - i. I'm not sure you want this kind of life you are looking for but Jesus says that in him you will have life forever. One day the suffering will be over. Those who die in faith will live forever with Christ in perfect peace.
 - ii. He bids you come and find rest and peace in him even while living in a broken and chaotic world.