

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

Date: 03 July 2022
Services: *Across the Diocese*
Series: New beginnings
Title: Stephen martyred
Passage: Acts 6:8-15 and 7:51-60
Outline: **The God who**
Calls
Rescues
Convicts... his people

His people who
Rebel
Resist
Reject... their God

Epilogue

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit".

Then he fell on his knees and cried out "Lord, do not hold this against them".

When he had said this, he fell asleep.

That's a **dramatic** ending to the chapter!

How did it end up like this?

You'll remember Stephen had been accused of blasphemy for speaking against the **temple** and the **law**...

...and now here he is **dead**?

What happened in **between**?

53 verses – nearly **two pages** in our Bibles – Stephen has been giving his defence...

And it seems it didn't go too **well!!** //

the **big** picture of what Stephen is trying to do is this... he wants to show his **accusers** that what he says about **Jesus** is in perfect **sync** with the God they **say** they **serve**!

This is very significant for us... to understand the **Jewishness** of our faith...

Jesus was a **Jew** in the historic line of none other than their great **hero King David**

He is the long awaited **Messiah**

And all the **first Christians** – all the **early leaders** were **Jews**...

Jesus turns up as **promised** – as **always expected** by the Old Testament – in **perfect fulfilment of God's**

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eternal plans for his people...

“It’s not **blasphemy** I’m speaking – it’s none other than the **unfolding of God’s purposes** – it’s **prophetic fulfilment** –this was how it was always going to !

It’s God at work – as he said he would be!! //

So let’s see if we can unpack what Stephen had to say and work out how he ended up **being tragically killed**.

We obviously won’t have time to go through all the detail, but here is what I think he set out to do

He wants us to see God as the one who

1. Calls
2. Rescues
3. Convicts... his people

And he want us to see God’s **people** as they who

1. Rebel
2. Resist
3. Reject... (the God who – calls, rescues, convicts)

Let’s spend a little time on each

God is the God who

1. CALLS

Stephen begins right back at Genesis 12 – right back at the beginning...

You may remember that God called Abraham to leave his homeland and head to the land God would give him... he is calling the **nation of Israel** – his **chosen people** - into **being**.

Against all odds, he promises Abraham that he would become the father of a **huge nation**... and that they would be God’s **people** in God’s **place** under God’s **rule**.

He **committed** himself to them – he would be their God and they would be his people

So God calls the very **nation of Israel** into being!

Secondly, Stephen says, our God is the God who:

2. RESCUES

Cutting a very long story short...

The fledgling nation of Israel faced a severe famine

But God had already arranged for one of their number – a **descendant of Abraham** – **Jacob’s boy Joseph** – to rule over **Egypt** and to make **provision** during the **famine**

God is a God who **rescues**

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...so his people were rescued from *famine* by God's provision in Egypt... but that involved them as a fledgling nation – moving TO Egypt for their survival...

But over time - as the nation of Israel **grew**, the Egyptians saw the nation of **Israel** as a **threat!**

So the Egyptians put them to **work** for them in harsh and cruel ways... they became a nation of slaves... and they called out to God for help...

So God raised up a leader - Moses - to powerfully rescue them from the slavery of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt – **back** to the land he had **promised**

That's the **same** Moses to whom God **revealed himself** at the burning bush!

The same Moses who promised God would send a **prophet**... pointing all the way **forward** to **Jesus!**

Our God rescues cries Stephen in his defence – v34 - *I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free...*

This is the God **YOU** believe isn't – Stephen was saying – the **same one** **I believe in!!**

The one who **ultimately** rescues through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ!

God **calls**, God **rescues**...

3. GOD WHO CONVICTS

The minute God in his grace and power **rescued** his people – they **rebelled** against him...

v39 – **Our fathers** (yours and mine says Stephen to his accusers) *our fathers refused to obey and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.*

They made an idol in the form a golden calf and worshipped it instead

And then the chilling phrase in v42 - *God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies*

God **convicts** his people... and his **law** – stood against them and revealed their **ignorance** and their **rebellion**.

So Stephen says – **look** – **this** is the **one** and **same God** we **serve**... I **believe** what you **believe!** **We're on the same page!**

God **called** his nation into being through Abraham

God **rescued** his people from slavery in Egypt

And God **convicts** his people for the way they treated him.

But, says Stephen – what about his people down through history? What about **YOU** his people now...?

His people

1. REBEL

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v39 **our** fathers refused to obey

v40 they ask Moses' brother to "make us gods"

v41 they brought sacrifices to [the golden calf] in honour of **what their hands had made**

...it's on the historical record – time and time again that God's people were a rebellious people

And secondly:

2. THEY RESIST GOD'S WORK IN THEM

v51- you stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: you always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there every a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One...

Prophet after prophet was ignored or worse...

They loved to listen to **false** prophets instead – who cried 'peace, peace' when there was no peace – or who proclaimed that what was evil **wasn't evil!**

As an aside... all around the wider church today – people love to listen to the false prophets and reject what God through his word is calling them to do! They especially love it when false teachers proclaim and celebrate as **good** – what God has declared to be **evil!**

And thirdly:

3. THEY REJECT

They reject God **himself** – they reject **Jesus**

v52 – the last part – *And now you have betrayed and murdered him...*

You've done away with the **Righteous one**

The **Messiah**

God!!

They killed **God!** //

Stephen says : You've **received** the law – but you've not **obeyed** the law.... ///

Well – Stephen didn't get to sum up – so let's sum up **for** him....

In his **defence**, Stephen is saying... I'm not saying anything **other** than what is completely **consistent** with what you **already believe**

Jesus came in complete **fulfilment** of **God's plans** and **purposes**

For our God is the God who **calls**, who **rescues**, who **convicts**

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But you – you have shown yourselves to be completely consistent with our fathers throughout history.

You're just the same

You **rebel**

You **resist**

And now you've utterly **rejected** God's Righteous One!

EPILOGUE

And with that – they lost the plot – let's read again:

v54 – when they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God".

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man names Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

It would almost be **comical** if it wasn't so **appalling!**

Covering their ears and **yelling** at the top of their **voices!**

Exactly what **children** do if they don't want to hear what you have to say...

It's **pathetic**. It's **blind**. It's **ignorant!**

So they **kill** him for his **blasphemy**. ////

Did you see the way Stephen **died**? Did you hear the words from his **lips**?

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"

Do you remember the words of Jesus? – **Father into your hands I commend my spirit.**

"Lord do not hold this sin against them" - Stephen

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" - Jesus

Stephen – identifies with Jesus in his death. He knows he is suffering **for** Christ – and as it were – **with** Christ.

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But where then does this account leave us?

Three things:

1. I want to reiterate the Jewish heritage of our faith.

Don't let anyone tell you that this was all made up in the 1st century!

The way the unfolding account of Jesus' life and death and resurrection – his mission, his purpose, his teaching – **matches with Old Testament expectations** – is **brehtaking!**

Our faith is **not** an **invention** of the **1st century!**

It's as **old** as the **ancient people** of **Israel...** it dates from **pre-history** – in fact it dates with the **eternal plans** and **purposes** of **God.**

It's not **new**

It's not **made up**

Our God is the one who **calls, rescues** and **convicts.**

2. This persecution is not unexpected

Do you remember the words of the Lord Jesus?

18 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. John 15:18-19

Or this: They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. 3 They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. John 16:2

Or this: 'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' John 16:33

So what we've read here in Acts 7 is **exactly** what Jesus **told** them would happen – exactly what he **prepared** them for.

And **we** need to be ready for it in this our day!

I want you to be ready...

Christians are now being **killed**

Christians are being completely **ridiculed** and **attacked** in the **media** and on **social** media

You will be faced with **ridicule, persecution** sooner or later

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You'll be overlooked for a **job**

If you're in a job, there are opportunities you won't be **given**

In your **village** – if you identify as a **Christian** you'll be at least **avoided** by some, by others – **ostracised**.

At work – you'll be kept on your **toes** by those constantly looking out for opportunities to say 'well that's not very **Christian, is it!**' //

Will you be **ready**?

Will you be **immoveable**?

Will you take a **stand** for the **Lord Jesus**?

Will you consider it an **honour** to **suffer** for his **name**? ///

Stephen laid down his **life** for **Jesus**...

...because he had **already** given his life over to Jesus!!

Do you see that?

Have you given over yourself to **Jesus**?

Put **yourself** – your **life** – your **gifts** – your **possessions** – completely as his **disposal**?

That's **good** – because if you've **really** handed your life over to him, then when and if it is **literally** demanded of you – it will be **just a small step more**... it will be in line with what you've **already done!**

Finally...

3. See the glory of the Lord Jesus

Stephen was accused of **blasphemy** in what he claimed about Jesus...

But these people covered their **ears** because they did not want to **hear**... ...**we** have heard and seen and accepted – and loved!

Jesus is **indeed** the centre point of God's purposes

Yes – **betrayed** and **murdered**

...but then **risen** and **ascended**

And **through** that death and resurrection... we have **life**.

See the **glory** of the Lord **Jesus here**

The one they **rejected** we now see **lifted** high

They **closed** their hearts

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We **open** our hearts

They **rejected**

We **receive**

He now is at the Father's **right hand**

And we live in **freedom** and **forgiveness** because of him

Our sin is **gone**

The power of **evil** and **the evil one** is broken

We have **new life now**

...And a glorious **eternity** with him to which we look forward and wait with eager expectation

So we **persevere**

We **live** for him

Our life is lived for **his glory alone!**
