

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

Confidence to Do Something for Christ

Acts 7:51-8:3

51 You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it. 54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

A noted brain surgeon, Dr. Bronson Ray, was taking a stroll when he saw a boy on a scooter smash headfirst into a tree. Realizing that the boy was seriously injured, the doctor told a bystander to call an ambulance. As he proceeded to administer first aid, a boy not much older than the injured one nudged through the crowd that had gathered and said to Dr. Ray, "I'd better take over now, sir. I'm a Boy Scout and I know first aid,"

We chuckle at the naïve confidence of that young boy. Yet, the truth be told, he was confident. He had knowledge and ability and was unashamed to use it. What is it that makes a young boy confident enough to dismiss an adult, much less a brain surgeon from an accident scene? He had a working knowledge; a knowledge he knew had to be put to work and that he could work.

Do we see the lesson being taught to us? As Christians, we have been given the knowledge of Christ. The knowledge of One who lived, died, rose again and is right now at the right hand of the Father in heaven ministering on our behalf. It is this same risen and ascended one that calls us who profess His name to be His witnesses; the unashamed declarers of His truth. And what is that truth? That truth is contained right here in His Word. And more we become familiar with His Word, the more confidence we will have to communicate this Word to others. Beloved, we need to become like that boy scout; willing to push aside the so-called educated in order to administer the first aid of the gospel. For the Word of God is our confidence. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16-17...

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

Do you desire to be a man or woman of God? If so, then this passage is for you, that by the study of God's Word, you will be able to teach, to reprove, to correct, and to train so that others will be competent in living like Christians. And in our Acts text this morning, the central truth is about the person of Jesus. So, if you have any desire in being a Christian and living like a

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

Christian, then this passage is written for you. The event recorded in our text is not written as a preparation to be martyrs but more to the point, to prepare us to be Christians.

As I read the text, it is easy to see that the key feature of Stephen’s vision is of Jesus in heaven, standing at God’s right hand (7:55-56). Please, do not miss this subtle description of what is taking place. Look with me at Matthew 26:63-64. For Jesus Himself, at His trial, had told these same men to whom Stephen is now speaking about what would come to pass in the future; with one notable exception. Listen to the exchange between Jesus and the high priest, Caiphas...

63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” 64 Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.”

Jesus was drawing on two Old Testament passages when He said this. **First** He was referring to Psalm 110:1 where David wrote, **“The LORD says to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”** This is a conversation between God the Father and God the Son in which the Father promises the Son that He will have all authority and will rule over all His enemies. This is a PROMISE. This is a statement of confidence. **Second**, Jesus alluded to Daniel 7:13-14 where Daniel saw the future. There we read...

13 I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. 14 And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

There is no doubt that these religious leaders knew that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah and this is why they killed him. With this backdrop, we find Stephen having a vision of the reality that Jesus predicted and in our text, we find him reporting this reality to these same men. And so, for the same reason they killed Jesus, they now want to kill Stephen.

But I would be doing us a disservice if I did not point out one remarkable difference between what Jesus said back in Matthew 26, and what Stephen sees here in Acts 7. For Stephen does not see Jesus sitting at God’s right hand but, what? According to verse 56, Jesus is standing at God’s right hand. Every other reference I find to Jesus being at the right hand of God, states that He is seated. This is exactly what we read in Psalm 110:1. So, then, why is it important enough for Stephen to see and Luke to record that Jesus is standing and not sitting?

Let me remind you of the importance of Jesus being seated at God’s right hand. This emphasizes the finished work of Jesus as any high priest that ministered in the holy place before God, always stood for he always had a job to accomplish. But Jesus said of His work, “It is finished!” No more work is needed save the ongoing ministry of intercession for His people. To be seated emphasizes the fact that He is waiting for that day when God sends Him back to earth on the clouds of heaven to take up His people, to destroy His enemies, and to bring in the new heavens and a new earth.

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

But Stephen sees Jesus as standing. What does this mean? The point here is to emphasize that Jesus is actively involved in this world and especially in His church. While Jesus indeed sits as our high priest, having finished the work of salvation, Jesus yet is active as Lord in His Church, exercising power and enabling us to fulfill all of His purposes on this earth. What a confidence builder! Jesus stands before us! Jesus is at work in us and through us and for us. We are reminded as we read this text that even now, the crucified, resurrected, exalted Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ is standing, He is at work in and through His church. And this leads me to our main point, which is this; **like Stephen, our hope in the Risen and Ascended Christ gives us confidence.** In our text, we see how this confidence reveals itself in the life of Stephen in three areas; and, as believers in Christ, we should see our confidence reveal itself in like manner. So again, like Stephen, our hope in the risen and ascended Christ gives us confidence to...

I. Speak the truth of Christ (Acts 7:51-53)

51 You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

Let us admit it; one of the hardest things to do is to speak to people the truth about Jesus, especially if we know that they might become or are simply antagonistic toward spiritual things in the first place. As Christians, we have turned Peter's exhortation to give people an account for the hope we have in Christ with gentleness and reverence and replaced it with timidity and silence; or with political correctness and vagueness. Yet from the verses we just read, the thing that should capture our attention is how different is Stephen's evangelistic and apologetic approach from ours. In the previous verses, Stephen has given a primer of Israel's history and now he turns to these men and uses intensely condemning language. What kind of approach is this to call these people out for their sin with such direct language? The point is that Stephen is not simply telling some men a story they already knew but that he was using the history of Israel to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and that they, like their ancestors of old, had rejected God's prophet by crucifying Jesus. They had killed Stephen's Lord and Savior and he pulled no punches in pointing out that they were just like stubborn Israel of old calling them "**stiff-necked,**" "**uncircumcised of heart,**" and "**resisting the Holy Spirit.**"

Such terms are used repeatedly in the Old Testament to describe Israel and by none other than God Himself. Let me give you just a few examples:

In Exodus 33:3, just after the incident with the golden calf, God says to His people:

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate [stiff-necked] people, and I might destroy you on the way."

In Jeremiah 9:26 we read...

Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart."

The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

In Isaiah 63:10, in speaking of Israel, the Lord says...

But they rebelled And grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.

Stephen is using these terms to show the people that they have simply followed in Israel's footsteps by being stiff-necked against God's commands, by acting like uncircumcised people who have no knowledge of God or of His Word, and by resisting Him and His commands continually. But the key evidence that what Stephen was saying was true is found in verses 52-53, where we see the link made; that just as the forefathers had murdered the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, these men had killed the One that the prophets said would come. Not what would be regarded today as the best evangelistic approach. Yet Stephen not only tells them this, but as he sees the heavens open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, he goes right on to report this to these angry people. Stephen knows they are angry and yet he adds fuel to the fire asserting that he can see the Son of Man standing at God's right hand. No one else there evidently saw what he did. He did not have to say this, so why did he? Can you even imagine exclaiming verse 56 to a hostile crowd that hates not only Jesus but also you?

But what does this mean for us? It is obvious that God has spoken with such harsh and pointed language concerning the sin of people. Would it not be rude to call people in their sin "stiff-necked," "uncircumcised of heart" and "resisting the Holy Spirit"? Is this biblical evangelism? Would people respond to this? Well, yes, they respond, but with anger, right? Is this a model for how we are to share Christ with others?

Beloved, while we may not use the same words as Stephen, I must exhort us that we must be proclaiming the same truths as Stephen. In the book of Acts are a number of sermons that all address the same basic problem of human nature; that when it comes to God, we are indeed a stiff-necked, obstinate and resistant people. Beloved, if we are going to tell people the good news of Christ's coming and dying for the sins of His people, we must also tell people the bad news about why He had to come for them. The Bible is clear on this bad news, that every one of us, by nature, are wicked sinners who hate God and resist Him every chance we get. The hard news is that apart from the work of God in us, we have no ability to love God or even want to do so. Like Stephen here in this sermon, we must tell people that Jesus is the only way to heaven, even in spite of the fact that so many around us do not believe such a truth is possible because there must surely be multiple ways to heaven. Not one person who heard Stephen believed him, but he said the truth anyway. We need to be like Stephen and regardless of the response, tell them the truth about Jesus. We must warn them of the consequences of their sin.

Beloved, if someone does not know that something seemingly pleasurable is dangerous then that person will not do anything to avoid the danger. In such a case, it would be neither ethical nor loving not to tell people about the eternal danger they face or to hide from them the means by which the danger may be avoided. The well-known entertainer Penn Jillette of the duo Penn and Teller and self-avowed atheist, in a self-taped interview after a show he did, made this statement about how Christians, if they really believed what they said, ought to conduct themselves. He wrote,

"I don't respect people who do not proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe there is a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think, "Well,

The Church Alive

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward.” And atheists who think people should not proselytize, “Just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself...” Ahh...how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize; how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn't believe it; that truck was bearing down on you; there is a certain point where I tackle you, and this is more important than that, and I have always thought that.”

How can I put this? It is nothing short of immoral and unloving for those of us who know the truth not to tell people the truth about themselves, the danger they are in; and how Jesus is the only One who can save them from that danger. Parents, you are duty bound to share with that bundle of joy, that child you love that he or she is a terrible sinner and will most certainly go to hell if he or she does not trust Jesus as Savior and Lord. We are obligated to tell that sweet and quiet neighbor who waves at you as you drive off but who has no interest in Jesus that he is a rebel against the God who gives him everything and that he must turn from his many sins and trust in Jesus.

But how Pastor? How can I say such forthright things? Let me ask you one question. Do you believe in the risen, ascended Christ? Do you believe that Jesus is at this moment, at God's right hand interceding for us, and enabling us by His Holy Spirit to boldly and compassionately tell others that their biggest problem in life is their continual resisting the Holy Spirit and because of this, they are placing themselves under the wrath of God. My confidence is that Jesus is standing in heaven, empowering His people to faithfully and clearly declare that He alone is the only hope by which a person may be rescued from the wrath of God. We are not to be rude or mean, but we are not to pull any punches. People are sinners and need to know they are sinners and they need to know the penalty of sin. Jesus is the Savior, the only hope and people need to know how to know Him. The truth is that our great God has provided one great Savior for sinners and His name is Jesus. Thus, **our hope in the Risen and Ascended Christ gives us confidence to...**

• *Speak the truth of Christ; but also to...*

II. Suffer for the cause of Christ (Acts 7:54-60; 8:1-3)

54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

Another obvious hang up for us in sharing our faith in Jesus is connected to the idea that somehow we might suffer if we do. We might be hated by family or friends. We might lose our job. In some places in the world, you might not only lose your life, but the lives of your family members may be at risk. Thus, it is a temptation to be timid and quiet. But Stephen's confidence

The Church Alive

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

was such that he was willing even to suffer death in order that the gospel message of Jesus as Savior and Lord be proclaimed.

As we read verses 54 and on into chapter 8, there are both similarities as well as some striking differences between the death of Stephen and the death of the Savior. Let me note a few of the similarities. First, we see that the same people who killed Jesus are now killing Stephen. Next, like Jesus, Stephen is killed outside the city of Jerusalem. And what are the reasons cited for killing Jesus and Stephen? They were both charged with blasphemy. It was Jesus who said He was the Messiah and Stephen who simply proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Both the confessions of Jesus and of Stephen contained the same assertion that Jesus is the Son of Man who comes in the glory of the Lord and both Jesus and Stephen commit their spirit to God. And finally, both Jesus and Stephen ask God to have mercy on their adversaries.

But notice now the differences. We already noted earlier that Jesus said He would be sitting at God’s right hand and Stephen saw Jesus standing there. Jesus commits His spirit into the hands of God the Father, yet Stephen commits his spirit into the care of Jesus. Similarly, while Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who assaulted Him, Stephen asked Jesus to forgive them. Do not miss the point. Stephen is identifying Jesus as God.

And as we see what happens here to Stephen because of his commitment to Jesus, we are reminded of the repeated truth of Scripture, that indeed all who desire to live godly in Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). It was Jesus Himself who taught, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). If we follow Jesus, we should expect to suffer somehow and someday.

But, because of Stephen’s confidence in the risen and ascended Savior, he has the ability to suffer and die well. How is this so? **First**, understand that as Stephen sees Jesus standing in heaven, he is given confidence that everything is going according to plan. It was not as if Jesus was wringing His hands wondering how this was all going to turn out for Stephen. Rather Jesus was there to receive Stephen. This was part of the plan. And so, just as the Father ordained the suffering of Jesus, so too was this part of God’s plan

Second, notice that Jesus, by His standing there, is approving of Stephen, and ready to welcome him into heaven. This gives Stephen confidence, to know that he is able to face suffering and death because he knows that suffering and death are not the end of the story. He knows that for the believer, death is gain. He knows that death is but the doorway by which to be face to face with Jesus. And not even the hatred of these men, or the suffering and death experienced can separate him from the One he loves.

What we have here in our text is not just for Stephen. I has been written to encourage us; to give us the same confidence. What a blessing that this is our hope; this is our confidence. Beloved, our crucified and risen Savior is right now in heaven, calling you to proclaim His truth; calling you to momentary light afflictions; and ready to receive you into eternal joy. And what then is any amount of suffering in comparison to the suffer of our Lord Jesus Christ for us? And what then is any amount of suffering in light of the eternal bliss that is promised to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. It is okay and indeed a blessing to suffer for Christ. So then, **our hope in the Risen and Ascended Christ gives us confidence to...**

- *Speak the truth Christ*
- *Suffer for the cause of Christ; and*
- *And finally to...*

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

III. Share the love of Christ (Acts 7:56, 60)

56 and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ... 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

As we have noted, it can be hard to speak the truth of Christ to those who do not want to hear it. And it can be hard to suffer for the cause of Christ, if we think it only to be to our harm and not to God’s glory and our good. But it can also be hard to share the love of Christ with others, who because of their actions, we feel do not deserve it. Yet, if we be biblical, we come to understand that there is not one of us, regardless of what we have or have not done, that deserves the love of Christ. And so, as we have so freely received the love of Christ, we are called to freely give.

Notice Stephen’s last words. He says in verse 60, “**Lord, do not hold this sins against them.**” What does this mean? **First**, let us consider what Stephen is asking Jesus to not do. He is asking that Jesus not give these men up to their sins as God had done to Israel (remember 7:42). Stephen, in spite of the fact that he is being murdered, asked Jesus to deal with these men according with His mercy and love. This is a prayer for the salvation of these men. This is an evangelistic prayer. “Lord, these are wicked sinful men who killed Your Son and who now are killing me. But just as you showed mercy to my own murderous, rebellious heart, show these men mercy. Open their eyes to behold the truth of Jesus. Save them from their sins!”

How could Stephen do this? Do you know that he is only following the example of His Savior and obeying His commands? In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus taught...

43 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

What an example or Christlikeness is Stephen; loving the very men who persecute him. And as Stephen prays this, it reminds us that everything he has said to these men, including the hard and harsh name-calling of verse 51, has all been motivated by love. Not once is Stephen being demeaning or condescending in his preaching. In fact, what he took the time to say revealed that he loved these men and was pleading with them to hear and respond to the truth.

Our world does not understand this kind of confidence and conviction. The people you live next to, work with and see around town struggle to believe that anyone can speak in such absolute terms about life and death and do so in love. Today, calling what God says is sin is called hate speech. Yet, what greater love has ever been revealed than what we see in our text, that as Stephen is murdered unjustly, he prayed not for God’s judgment to fall upon his enemies for their sin but rather that God’s grace and mercy to be poured out upon them. Beloved, if we know Christ, then we must know and reveal this kind of love. The greatest joy for any believer is this, to see one of his or her enemies, and more importantly, to see an enemy of God, become a child of God; to know, understand and experience forgiveness of sin.

The question for us as we close is this, how can we become a person who loves our enemies and prays that they experience God’s mercy? I mean, if you really want to get even with an enemy, then pray that they drown; yes drown; drown in the deep seas of God’s love and mercy. But our text does point out two things that will reveal us as those who love our enemies and pray for their salvation.

First, I would have you see that the key characteristic of these enemies, according to verse 51, is that they are always resisting the Holy Spirit. But what is the key characteristic of

The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

Stephen? He is, according to verse 55, filled with the Holy Spirit. How is Stephen, who is Jewish, any different from these men who are killing him, who are also Jewish. How is it that he is not resisting, but rather is filled with the Holy Spirit? No one fills himself with the Holy Spirit. What is the difference? God had mercy upon him. By grace, Stephen was filled with the Spirit. It was God's unmerited, free, sovereign determination to do good to Stephen.

What is the point? The point is that Jesus did not hold Stephen's sins against him, but loved him, in spite of what he deserved. And now, in like manner, Stephen knows that the only reason he is the one being killed and not in the crowd of murderers is the grace of God. So he has compassion upon these poor blind men and pleads that the same grace shown him would be shown them. When you see people trapped in some sin, or express their hatred of Christians, do you think, "How can they be so sinful and rebellious?" Or rather do you think, "Except for the grace of God, there go I! Lord, let them experience Your grace! Let me be a mirror that reflects Your grace to them."

Second, we see that Stephen is free to love these enemies because he knows that if God does not have mercy upon them then God will justly punish them for their sins. Stephen knows that he is not the judge, God is. Stephen is called to be a witness and to love; longing for the salvation of these men. Do you long for the salvation of others, particularly those with whom you do not get along with very well?

I need to wrap this up, but please notice with me one more thing from our text. For here in this account, here in Acts 8:1, we introduced to someone who will be the central character from chapter 13 through chapter 28. He is introduced to us as Saul but will become known as Paul, the great apostle. We read that Saul was in "**heartly agreement with putting [Stephen] to death.**" Yet this one, for whom Stephen prays, would become the author of over half of the New Testament. This Saul is not only instrumental in the death of Stephen but become the major instigator in the persecution of the church. And, in answer to Stephen's prayer, as we will come to see more clearly in Acts 9, Jesus does not hold Saul's sin of murdering Stephen and other Christians against him but rather shows Saul grace and saves him. This is jaw dropping. Beloved, the one, who humanly speaking, is the reason that you and I are sitting here this morning; this Saul was saved in connection with Stephen's love and prayer for his enemies.

There is sense in which we are Christians because Stephen loved and prayed for his enemies. Can you begin to imagine what good God might do through us if we will, like Stephen, simply share the love and grace of Christ and leave the issues of justice to our God? And Stephen had the confidence to do all of this simply because his hope was in the risen and ascended Christ. Where is your confidence? If it is in Christ, then you will see yourself...

- *Speaking the truth Christ*
- *Suffering for the cause of Christ*
- *Sharing the love of Christ*

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2012 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, and 2300 South 13th Street, Rogers, AR 72758.