

A Body That Sacrifices

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[0:00] Hey, good morning, everybody. How's everyone doing today? Sweet, sweet. Can we just take a quick moment? I just want to pray. I feel like, man, that was a lot of like great stuff.

And then transitioning to this from that just feels like, gosh, it would be really cool just to take a moment to just pray for those churches and then we can get into the word. So Lord, we thank you for what you are doing all over the world.

We are enlarged by the fact that there can possibly be so many churches. 17,500 house churches. There could be 50,000 people in this movement that are already believers and another 120,000 above that that are checking out you and learning about you, Jesus, through these home churches. So continue to work through them. And I just pray that this wouldn't be a one-off thing where we go home and kind of forget about it, but burden our hearts. Like Elliot said, burden our hearts. This would be something that would be in front of us in prayer, Lord God. We want to see every tribe, tongue, and nation confessing and professing and praising the name of the Lord Jesus as Lord and Savior.

[1:11] Amen. Amen. My name is Jesse. Those of you who don't know me, man, it is, I'm so glad you're here. If you're with us, checking us out for the first time. Thanks for being with us.

If you're listening online to this, thanks for listening. If you have a Bible, go ahead and turn to Acts. And we're going to be in chapter seven in the book of Acts today. And starting at verse 54, which is very much towards the end of that very long chapter.

We are continuing in the series in the book of Acts. And what we're doing is we're looking at this historical account of the early church to see what made it so dynamic so we could see and learn and check it out and see what it has for us, what it speaks to us today.

They were a church that were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were devoted to the gospel, to community. And they really lived out their faith in such a remarkable way. And what they were doing is they were fulfilling Jesus's mission to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And so far, what we've seen in the chapters that we've covered, the stories that we've covered, they have been such faithful witnesses to this in Jerusalem and in Judea.

[2:24] So Jerusalem is kind of the big city of Judea. Judea is kind of the maybe small state or province, if you will. Israel in the nation of Israel. But now it is about to spill beyond those borders.

The gospel hasn't really broken out at all beyond Jerusalem and Judea. So it's going to do that. And we're going to see that in this chapter. But it's going to do it in a very unexpected way. And so before we get into it, just want to set up the context for this because we're going to read about a guy named Stephen.

And if you listened to last week's sermon, you'll hear that Stephen was one of the men picked to be a deacon in the early church to help serve widows and to make sure they were being cared for.

But we also know that he was a man full of the spirit and full of wisdom as well. And so he gets pulled into this trial by the Sanhedrin. And Sanhedrin is a big word.

And the Sanhedrin were this, they were this court, basically a religious court in Judea. And what they would do is they were making sure everybody was following the laws of the land and the laws of Moses correctly.

[3:33] And so if anything was a scant or awry and they're hearing like, you know, things going on that, hey, we have this teacher over here saying some weird stuff. The Sanhedrin would pull them in and check them out and put them on trial.

And so that's what happened to Stephen. He gets pulled into this trial by the Sanhedrin. And what happens is these false witnesses were brought in to basically make sure that Stephen would be

convicted, would find a conviction of guilty.

But what we see is like after these false witnesses all come and they give their reports about Stephen and malign his name and slander him, Stephen gets a chance to respond and he gives this beautiful defense.

And it isn't taken very well. And this is where we pick it up in verse 54. Now when they heard these things, the Sanhedrin, they were enraged.

And they ground their teeth at him, 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. And he said, behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

[4 : 40] But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 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.

And as they were stoning Stephen, Stephen called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And then, and when he had said this, he fell asleep. 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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

But Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

[5 : 41] Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip. When they heard him and saw the signs that he did for unclean spirits crying out with a loud voice came out of many who had them.

And many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. This is God's word. So last week, we looked at a core characteristic of Jesus' followers, right?

We looked at like how Jesus calls us not to clamor to the top of some spiritual hierarchy, but he's always calling us to move lower, to be servants to those, to the least of these.

And we are born with this nature that actually gravitates to gaining any power we can get. But Jesus' nature, his nature is to gravitate, to give power away, to take the place of weakness.

And Jesus said to be great in his kingdom means to be lowly. And this call to go lower is difficult because of how costly it is. I mean, we recognize that.

[6 : 49] And as we've seen in this passage, that cost can be severe. And as in Stephen's case, it could be ultimate. And the question for us is, man, do we have a grid for this? Church, do we have a grid for this?

Because this account shows us something about the church that isn't popular in affluent Western culture. And that's this. The church is a body that sacrifices. That's what God calls us to.

That's what Jesus calls us to. And in all respects, what we see in Stephen in this passage, he's this sterling example for us, right? He cares for widows.

He's full of the spirit and wisdom. He's an eloquent preacher. He's bold and daring for Jesus. Yet, interestingly, besides all of that, God doesn't save him from suffering.

I mean, consider this. When we read that passage, Stephen looks up and he sees a vision of the resurrected Jesus in heaven at the highest place of honor and power.

[7 : 46] Which means that Jesus is looking down on this trial. This joke of a trial where people are lying about Stephen so that they could kill him. And yet, Jesus doesn't stop the madness, right?

There is no thunderbolts that come down from heaven to kill his accusers. There's no angels that break in and remove Stephen and keep him safe, right? And when you think about it, we see previously that that had happened, right?

Peter and John, they got jailed. Angels broke them out. It's not that God couldn't do that. He was just choosing not to do that in this moment. And here's the problem. If you hold to a formula that your obedience and your faithfulness equals God's protection and a life of prosperity, then this historical account poses a serious problem, right?

Because obedience and faithfulness, they don't always produce the same outcomes in life.

Sometimes they yield blessing, but not always.

As Jesus' disciples, moving lower to be a blessing will sometimes bring about seasons where we live in favor and abundance. And that's awesome.

[8 : 55] However, moving lower may also mean suffering. It also may bring us into seasons of suffering. And the thing is, we can count on it.

It's not like an if it's going to happen, but a when it's going to happen. And let me just say, this can be a little confusing, especially if we hold to a narrow view of God's love.

Because we may think like, wait a second, hold on. Doesn't being a loving person mean wanting the best for people? Well, yes. Now, that's the easy answer to that question.

The more difficult part of that question to answer is determining what is best for people. Does God want our best? Yes. Does God know what's best for us?

Yes. And here's the dissonance we kind of live in as fallible creatures with limited wisdom. Is what we think is best for us.

[9 : 55] May not always be what is best for us. And we just have to reckon with that. We do. And we say this frequently in a harbor. God cares more about our holiness than he does about our happiness.

Man, it would be nice if it was the other way around, right? It's like, man, God, why can't you just care about my happiness more than my holiness? But here's the thing. Because he cares about our holiness, that is why he allows suffering.

And we even see it in this passage. He doesn't keep persecution from breaking out against the church. But that's different to saying that he doesn't have a purpose for that persecution.

God has a purpose for the suffering that he brings us through. And what do we see in this? What could have been God's purpose in allowing the Jerusalem church's persecution?

Why? Why would he allow that? Well, in one sense, we see it in the gospel spreading to new places. In verse 4 of chapter 8, it says, Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

[10 : 53] Philip, he went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ, that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. And so far, what we see up to this point in the history of the early church in Acts is the church's influence was limited to the city of Jerusalem, limited to the surrounding Judean area.

But remember that Jesus said to his disciples at the beginning of Acts, before he descended into heaven, in Acts 1 verse 8, the second part of that verse, it says, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea.

And then he goes on to name Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. And so we see here, up to this point, the disciples were crushing it in Jerusalem and Judea, and now God is pushing them beyond those borders.

He pushed them into Samaria, and you know how he did that? Persecution. He used persecution to do it. Now, let me just step back and say, like, hey, it is worth asking this question.

Was there not another method at God's disposal besides persecution? Why not show up in a vision to the apostles and just tell them to get their tails to Samaria and start preaching the gospel over there?

[12 : 06] That could have been an easier way, right? Could God have done that? Absolutely. And actually, what we've seen of this church so far, if that happened, you could have bet they would have been obedient and done that right away.

So why does God choose persecution? Why does he do that? And this is where I think we have to trust God's wisdom and his ways that they are higher than ours.

He knows what is best for you and me. See, God is, he's just not this guy in the sky that is commanding us. He's a good father.

That's what it says. And he says he is our father. Like, he sent Jesus to make a way so that we could come to the father. And so this is a reality.

And if God is a good father, and he is, he's the perfect father, he is raising us to be like him. And think about good parents. Do good parents give their children everything their little hearts want?

[13 : 08] Hey, all right, yeah. Right answer. Very good. Very good. No, they don't. Why? Are we mean parents when we do that? No, because we know children are selfish by nature.

And if you don't believe that, go volunteer in the kids ministry. And behold it with your own eyes. Kids are selfish.

They seek instant gratification. They aren't prone to sharing or wanting to share. They are impatient. They are impetuous. Sounds like a lot of us as adults still, right?

But despite all these flaws, man, we love our kids, don't we, parents? Our kids are like that in every way, but we still love them. You know, adults, you know, that we could be chief of sinners. And like kids, they're the cutest of sinners. That's the reality. But what does a good parent do to help their kids grow and mature into healthy, responsible adults?

[14:09] Well, they say no to their kids. They don't always say yes. They make them do chores. Even though they'd rather be playing, they help them finish their homework and make sure they finish their homework.

Besides, despite the tears and the attitudes that accompany it. They discipline them when they behave badly. And all of this is a part of parenting.

It's healthy. It's a healthy, loving exercise of your authority as parents. That's what you are called to do. And the goal for parenting is by the time that your kids leave the house, they've learned much better what it means to be a good friend, a good spouse, a good employee, a good boss.

All of those things. They're more well-adjusted for life. And God, he is our father in heaven. He loves us. He is the perfect parent.

And he has a purpose in our discipline. In Hebrews 12, 7 to 10, it says this. I'm going to read out of the NIV translation. Just because it works better.

[15:16] Endure hardship as discipline, it says. God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined and everyone undergoes discipline, that you are not legitimate.

Not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the father of spirits and live? They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best. But listen to this. God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share or partake in his holiness.

See, as much as God's purpose in this persecution was to get the gospel further out there, he had another purpose. Right? And that was to get the gospel deeper into their hearts.

See, the more that you and I share in God's holiness, the more we are partaking of his nature. Becoming like him and reflecting him in the way we live.

[16:25] And we see what God's holiness looks like most clearly in Stephen's death. Verse 59 of chapter 7. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. See, it wasn't in a favorable time of Stephen's life that we see Christ more clearly.

It's actually, it's in his death. And sacrificial love is the high mark of Christian maturity. It's not your perfect Sunday attendance.

It's not having the most devoted devotion ever devoted every single morning. It's learning to grow in sacrificial love. God could have used any method to spread his gospel, but he uses suffering.

But that is the gospel. The gospel is not you die for me, but I die for you. That's the gospel. And Stephen's last words of forgiveness, they echo Jesus' words on the cross.

[17:33] Luke 23, verses 33 and 34 has this account. And when they came to the place that is called the Skull, or Golgotha, there they crucified him, speaking of Jesus, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. See, God's holiness produces such a radical transformation in our hearts that we don't just suffer for suffering's sake. In our suffering, there's something greater. There's something more beautiful that can happen. Our suffering, we get to be conduits of God's mercy and grace, even to the very people that may be hurting us.

Now, let's recognize what Stephen is doing on behalf of the very people killing him. He's become their advocate. As he is being stoned to death, he is looking at those people, throwing these rocks at him that are slowly killing him.

And he is advocating to God, to Jesus on their behalf. If there was ever a justified time to cry out for God's justice and judgment on someone, Stephen had his moment.

[18:52] That would have been it. But instead of crying for judgment, he pleads for God's mercy. He pleads for God to forgive them. Man, Holy Spirit, I just pray that this truth would land on us.

Now, let me say this before we go any further, a little caveat. Stephen had no chance to escape this death. He had no power in and of himself to do it.

And I want to say that God doesn't say we must seek suffering or stay in abusive situations. We should find peace and seek to live in peace whenever it is possible and whenever it is in our power to do that.

And I'm saying this because too often you can hear these kind of stories and the church can use them and misuse them very badly and take it out of context to manipulate people and tell people that they have to stay in abusive marriages and some other forms of suffering.

That's not what is going on here. Stephen is suffering for the name of Jesus. He has no power to get out of it. And here's the thing where God gives you an out for your suffering.

[19 : 57] Man, take it. He opened prison doors for Paul and Peter to escape. But they didn't say like, mm-mm, going to stay in here. We got to suffer. No, they saw like, okay, God opens the door here.

There's an opportunity. We're going to get out of this. The persecuted church in this chapter, they were being persecuted. They spread abroad to safer places where they could be Christians and proclaim the name of Jesus.

Now, having said that, wherever God has you, his holiness calls you to live in a sacrificial love. And this is hard because we have vindictive hearts that want retribution.

We want those who make us suffer to suffer. But God's sacrificial love hopes that his grace and his mercy will flow to all so that their lives and their hearts will be radically changed.

And what Stephen hoped for was that the people that were killing him, throwing stones at him, would experience the reality of Jesus' love and saving grace. They would see him as the Messiah as he knew him.

[21 : 01] And they would turn and they would put their faith in him and they would be saved. And then one day, these people that killed him, he would see them in heaven and they would gather together and worship and exalt Jesus.

I mean, that is radical. He didn't want separation. Stephen wanted to close the gap between him and his murderers.

And we know that at least one of his killers is actually in heaven. Right? It said Saul was there, approving of Stephen's death, holding the tunics of those that were throwing the stones.

And this Saul would become the Apostle Paul. And Stephen's prayer for forgiveness was answered at least for one soul there. Maybe for more, but we know for sure at least one.

But his sacrifice not only opened the door for Saul to be saved, but for so many others to hear the gospel and to be saved. Look what it says in verse 5 of chapter 8.

[21 : 58] Right? Right? This fascinating turn of events.

Stephen dies. Great persecution starts to happen. The church scatters. And the gospel gets to a new place. Gets to Samaria. Just like Jesus wanted. And immediately that city, that place, that region, Samaria, they experienced the redemption power of God.

And the result of that, what was the result of that? There was much joy in that city. God uses our sacrifices. God uses the sacrifice of his church to spread his joy to others.

Now here's the thing. When we, you and I, if all we are living is for our happiness and for our joy, if that is the highest purpose in your life, I want to say you are settling for a cheap counterfeit.

It's the kind of joy and happiness that doesn't last. And it really doesn't compare to the real thing. But when God grabs a hold of our hearts, when he gets us and we begin to share in his holiness, because he's a good father who cares about us as his children, he's making us like him.

[23 : 32] What he does, he plunges us into his holy nature that starts changing our default setting that is all about me and wanting my joy and wanting my happiness.

And we move from being selfish joy seekers for our own good that are out for ourselves to being people who seek the joy of others. Right? And because we know that joy, that true joy, could only be found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

But the net result of that, when we live that way, is not just seeing others experience joy. Man, we get caught up in that too. Actually, their joy becomes our joy as well, because we get to see God healing people, setting people free of sin and enslavement to things like, we see in this passage, actually demonic powers.

People are getting set free from demonic oppression. And they're set free from the mindset and the deceit and the broken ways of this world. And they get to turn and they get to live for Jesus.

They get to live for something better, something that is real life, true life, and abundant life. And when the aim of your life is seeing God's redemptive potential in others, that's what you're on about. [24 : 48] You say, man, Lord, I want to see that. I want to live for that. I want that to be my highest calling. It may come with suffering, but God's joy triumphs over the suffering every single time.

As the band comes up, how can we respond? And I want to say this. If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, I want to say this. I just want you to know we all suffer.

Everyone suffers. That's a reality of life. But only in Christ, only in Jesus, can suffering have meaning. And I want to say this too.

You cannot suffer your way into heaven. Heaven has to get into you first. And the only way that happens is putting your faith in Jesus. You have to believe and accept that Jesus is the Son of God. And he's the Prince of Heaven, the King of Heaven who came down to earth and he suffered and died in order for your sins to be forgiven. And that is the truth.

[25 : 55] That is where you experience true joy. And we're going to have everybody respond in a moment. But I want to say, man, if you are hearing about this Jesus for the first time and you're saying, like, man, I believe.

I believe, Jesse. What do I got to do now? We're going to have a prayer that comes up in a moment that you could pray. And the Bible says, man, that's all you have to do to be saved. You don't have to jump through any more hoops.

All you have to do is believe. It's faith in Christ. There's going to be a prayer up there for you to pray to put your faith in Jesus. If you're here and already a Christian, I want to say, man, let's consider our lives.

Where are you at right now? What's happening in your life right now? How are you responding to suffering that you may be going through? How are you responding to the sacrifice God is bringing you through?

You know, there's three ways we could respond to suffering that God brings us through. It could be anger. It could be avoidance. Or it could be acceptance.

[27 : 04] And we know the first two are not how he wants us to respond. And we're going to take a moment right now to allow God just to examine our hearts. But also to shepherd our hearts.

He's a God of grace. He's a God who loves us. He's a God who wants to come beside us and alongside us and say, like, hey, it doesn't matter how you've been dealing. And with it poorly, man, my child, let me come and let me help you right now.

All right? So let's take a moment. Let's close our eyes. Let's open our hearts. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.